JOSEPHINE DELONCRE

At Water's Edge

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At Water's Edge

By JosephineDeLoncre

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Chapter 1

At Water's Edge- Chapters 1-4

At Water's Edge

To whom it may concern, if it concerns anyone at all,

It came from the depths of night,

Spreading its blackened wings of darkness,

Its eyes an abyss of memories, of life

Its thoughts blend with mine

Clouding my mind, my fears

And as I wake, its blackened wings are lifted

As it retreats to the depths, of night and space.

Character Index

Declyn Wakefield - Duke of Crescentferd

Vanessa Wakefield -Duchess of Crescentferd

Tristan Wakefield- Son of the Duke (10yr. Old)

Josephine Wakefield- Daughter of the Duke (6yr. Old)

Stephen Wakefield - Earl of Glenmore

Robert Hastings - Friend of Declyn's

Nicholas Devereux - Friend of Vanessa

Viviane Wakefield- Dowager Duchess of Crescentferd

Dr. Nathaniel Whittleton - Private Doctor of the Duke's Family

Prologue

If you are reading this, my children were kind enough to humor an old woman's final wishes. I was never one to keep a diary, not that I was ever a lack for words, as my mother would say. But rather I did not trust that the women in my home, would have ever been able to contain themselves and not read my deepest and darkest secrets. So it is funny to me

now, that I am writing this in hope that the story of my life will be read and shared, with my descendants and one day reach those who it was truly meant for.

In the beginning I started this diary so that I would not forget, as a keepsake in case this was all a dream. Though I do not know how I would have been able to take this with me if it was. Later I continued writing because it helped me remember, kept me focused on returning back to my own time, as I believed that I was not meant to be here. Keeping this diary helped me hold on to who I was, before I took that walk through the mist into the past, into my future.

As time went on I realized that this was my destiny, this was all meant to be. When you read this you will understand that time is a never ending circle with no beginning and no end. It is fluid and constantly in motion, you cannot change the future no more that you can change the past. The future has been cast in stone, our story has already been written, all that is left is for us to live it, enjoy it and love those who it brings us in contact with. A long time ago I

relinquished all control to the fates, for they wield the destiny of all.

Lady I hope that reading this brings you comfort and peace, though I know that you are hesitant to believe any of it. When you read this I hope that you find that my life turned out more beautiful than I imagined it could be. It is all that you ever wished for me. I found a man to love me and make me happy. He has given me the most beautiful children, who bring me such joy and happiness. My only regret was not being able to share them with you. I missed you terribly, especially through those milestones in my life where a daughter truly needs her mother, and her guidance. But you were always there in spirit and in my heart.

So I write this now to comfort you when you feel all is lost. In the beginning I was scared, I did not know nor did I understand fates master plan. Looking back now it all fits and makes sense. Though perhaps at my age of ninety five yes, ninety five mother, I have lived long enough I can see the grand scheme of life.

As you read this my life has far surpassed its zenith, yet in your reality it has only begun. Read this as the days go by, read it as I live it and that way you will be there with me, as you were always meant to be. Please know that I am well, that I am loved, and I have loved more than I thought was possible. My life is joyous so please be happy for me and know that you are always in my thoughts.

I love you now and always your,

Nina

Chapter 1.

April 12th, 2009

It is Easter Sunday and at the ungodly hour of 7am I am rudely awakened by my mother, who is having a panic attack about all things that need to get done before the guests arrive. Since then I have not stopped. After all the scrubbing and washing, cooking and setting up all are finally fed and satisfied. I set the dishwasher to wash and decide to escape the chaos. My dinner guest is nestled asleep in my room, so I can take a few minutes to myself,

without a worry of having to entertain her. I decided to take a long walk in the park, to get away from the pandemonium which has descended upon my house.

Walking up the steps to the park I notice it is an unusually humid day, which explains the thin layer of fog which is slowly approaching from the sea.

"Great!! My hair is going to be a frizz ball, why did I even bother straightening it."

I stick it in a low pony tail in hopes of bridling the unruly mess it's about to turn into. Making my way through the park I pull my camera out of my bag and start taking pictures, hoping to catch a shot great enough to grace my wall. As of late I have chosen photography as my creative outlet and if I say so myself I do believe I have gotten quite good.

Snapping away I realize that the fog is getting quite thick but, I don't care it looks great in my pictures it adds a certain 'je ne sais quoi'. As I continue to walk deeper into the park, it is getting rather difficult to see even a few feet in front of me. Though I have veered off the path a long time ago I'm not bothered, I know this place like the back of my hand; I'll find

my way out eventually, I convince myself. Not too far ahead I see a gorgeous patch of violets; I decide to make them my next subject. I am completely swept away with portraying them in the right light, to bring out their true beauty. Not paying attention to the overgrowth, my foot gets caught in the roots of a nearby maple. I scream out in surprise as I trip and my head hits a tree, but my voice barely carries. For the first time I notice the fog is like a white blanket, I can barely see even my own feet.

Pulling myself up into a sitting position and touching the spot where I hit my head, I feel quite a bump beginning to form. I lift my hand from my forehead and feel a trickle of warm blood.

"Great now I'm bleeding good going Nina, you can't even walk without attempting suicide."

Scrambling to my feet and dusting myself off, I notice my camera is missing. I scurry around looking for it; out in the distance I see a glint of silver. Certain it is my camera I take a few steps, closer to it. Walking forward I bend to pick it up, straightening I check if it's ok, paying little attention to where I'm walking I

take another step but my foot comes into contact with nothing but air. I tumble down the hill; thankfully I don't hit anything along the way. Angry with myself I get up, brush myself off and cursing my carelessness under my breath, I take a look at my surroundings.

In the fog everything looks so different, I honestly have no idea which side of the park I'm on or where I am at all. The fog really has me disoriented and now I feel a headache coming on from my previous encounter with the maple. I decide to give up and go home before I knock myself unconscious smacking into yet another tree. Walking up the hill I notice out of the corner of my eye a sunlit patch through the fog. Figuring the sun must be burning up the moisture, I turn to my right and walk towards it. I am hoping I'll find my bearings if I can see something other than the fog. The closer I get, the brighter the light it is like a beacon; calling to me and guiding me, as I step into it, it is blinding. Turning back I see nothing but pallid air so I continue walking deeper into the light. Not being able to see anything in the brightness, I wait for my eyes to adjust, but my head

is splitting and my ears are ringing. I start to see spots before my eyes, my vision gets darker and darker, I break into a cold sweat and I know what is coming on. I faint.

I am so tired I can't open my eyes I don't want to. I am so warm and cozy, but I should, its Monday and it's time to start getting ready for work. Oh.. how I wish I could take the day off. Even though I had an extra day to relax it just wasn't very relaxing, all that cleaning and entertaining. Grrr... It is really bright it must be 7am already, to make sure I roll to my right and take a peek. I look at my alarm clock, it takes my eyes too long to adjust but when they do, all I see is tree bark.

"Tree bark what the, ...??"

She swiftly sits up and looks frantically around, fear and confusion carving delicate lines on her face. Instinctively she brings her hand up to her forehead, wincing she feels the bump formed from the incident with the maple.

"The maple, the fog, the fall... Oh my God!"

Surveying her surrounding she realizes none of this looks familiar. There was no meadow in the park. She is in the middle of a valley beneath an old cherry tree just beginning to bloom. The air is crisp and clean, she can smell the fresh spring buds just beginning to open and release their heavenly scent. A bumble bee is buzzing above her head, "I should not be able to hear that" she thinks to herself, "its just too quiet here, the air is too clean something is wrong, very wrong".

"Where is the roar of cars speeding down the highway on the other side of the park?" Petrified and confused she is too scared to move, rooted to the spot she just stares trying to understand. None of this makes any sense. All she did was go for a walk, how did she end up here? She thinks to herself "Where is here?" How long was she out for? Gathering all the strength she can muster, she decides to wander down into the valley in hope she can find someone to help her, to tell her where she is.

The sun is bright, she is getting hot so she removes her coat and tosses it over her bag. A bird sings a

lovely melody in a nearby tree, as a soft spring wind blows through her hair. She turns her face up to the sun letting it wash over her, the warmth sending chills down her spine. Oh how she missed this, she has not taken so much joy in a walk through a meadow since being back in Croatia. She takes a deep breath the scents are amazing. The warm breeze is carrying the soft scent of the cherry blossoms, mixing it with the scent of the earth warmed by the sun. All of this is a feast for the senses she thinks to herself, as she walks through the waist high grass. With her eyes closed and her face upturned to the sky she walks blindly, letting her palms graze and caress the tall blades of grass. On her left she hears the sound of a bubbling brook and she heads toward it. Surrounded by the effortless beauty of the valley she almost forgets her troubles.

Lost in her own world she is abruptly brought back, as she nears the brook and realizes it is not a brook but rather voices. Children's voices, children laughing, a dog barking. Frantically she breaks into a run to catch-up to them before they leave. As she approaches them she sees a little girl playing with

her dog and an older girl watching over them while reading in the shade of a weeping willow. She stops in her tracks something is not right; as she nears she notices their clothes are billowy dresses like something out of a Jane Austen book. Memorized and confused by the sight before her she does not hear someone approaching her from the rear. Suddenly she feels something nuzzle her neck, she turns, jumps back and screams out of shock as a horse muzzle is inches from her face. Sensing her fear and startled by her scream the horse neighs and rears on its hind legs. At that moment she notices the rider is a young boy holding on for dear life as the horse rears from the ground. She screams again but nothing comes out, she runs in an attempt to catch the little boy as he looses his grip and slips from the saddle. Nikolina reaches him just in time, but fails to catch him properly instead he lands on top of her. Her head slams into the ground from the force of the impact. Hearing her screams the child and the young girl come running.

Nikolina hears the young girl scream out "Tristan!!!" as she dashes to his side. The over stimulation and

yet another blow to the head prove to be too much for Nikolina as she slowly begins to looses consciousness. But not before the young girl reaches her and the boy.

As her vision tunnels into darkness she hears the little boy whimper "Mommy".

Her body goes limp and she releases the child to the girl.

"Miss,.. Miss are you alright, are you hurt Miss.." were the last words she heard as she slipped into total darkness.

Chapter 2.

April 13, 2009

Coming to Nikolina I fully aware of her surroundings as well as the preceding incident which caused her to end up here. Here being the home of the young girl who she saw sitting under the weeping willow. Though she has yet to open her eyes she can tell that she is in a bedroom on a rather comfy bed. For the fear of being questioned Nikolina has kept her eyes shut and her ears open in hopes of finding more

about her hosts. So far she has discover that the young girl whose name she has yet to learn, is the mother of the little boy and girl, Tristan and Josephine. They all speak with an old English accent like something out of Pride and Prejudice. A thousand scenarios run through her head, as she tries to piece together a likely story that they will believe. The truth is too farfetched even for her to accept and she is the one living it. A light weight shifts on the bed, startled Nicky tenses up.

The slight movement is noted by her bed fellow and a soft musical voice whispers "Are we playing a game? I wager I can keep more still than you."

As much as this startles Nikolina it amuses her and a slow smile creeps on to her lips. Her cover blown she opens her eyes and sees the most enchanting little girl sitting on the corner of the enormous bed. Josephine is about four years old with the most delicate porcelain features framed by cascading chestnut curls. A picture of perfection in a sweet yellow dress of gauzy muslin, printed with white squares and tiny flowers which end just below her

knee. With her hands neatly folded upon her lap she stares at Nikolina with the most curios expression.

Her eyes a deep emerald green Nikolina has never seen before, she smiles as Josephine says

"I win". "Yes you do" Nikolina replies.

"Josephine where are you?" a voice calls out of the hall. Vanessa appears in the doorway her hands on her hips looking rater sternly at Josephine "I told you to leave our guest be, how will she ever get the rest she needs with you doting on her like a mother hen."

As Josephine turns to look at her mother Vanessa has a better view of the bed and sees that Nina is awake.

"Oh pardon me Miss I did not know that you were awake."

She walks into the room I observe she is not as young as I initially thought. I would say she is about my age, 25 or perhaps older but no more than 30; with auburn hair flowing freely in gentle curls well past her waist. She is much shorter than I; about five foot two with a slight frame. It is obvious to me now where Josephine gets her startling green eyes from.

She walks toward the bed with a pleasant smile and says "My name is Vanessa Wakefield Duchess of Crescentferd, after that unfortunate incident we brought you to my home. I see that you have met my littlest one Josephine".

Taking a seat at the edge of the bed, she raps her arms around Josephine and stares intently waiting for me to introduce myself.

"It is a pleasure to meet you your Grace, my name is Nicolette Martin. You have been very kind to bring me to your home but, if you would enlighten me as to where my belongings are I will gladly take my leave. I do not wish to impose on you anymore than I already have."

"Miss Martin it is a pleasure to finally learn the name of the woman who saved my son. Unfortunately as per doctors orders I cannot let you leave just yet. Dr. Whittleton has prescribed bed rest for you, after such a head injury. Furthermore, my son Tristan has yet to thank you, as well as apologize for the incident by the lake. Tristan is off to his grandmothers for the

day and will be returning soon. So, I am afraid that you will be staying with us for a wee bit longer."

As Nikolina begins to object Vanessa gets up off the bed, walks over to the desk in the corner of the room and rings a bell. Looking at Josephine she says "Darling I do believe it is time for your lessons."

Josephine looks longingly at Nina and Vanessa says to her "Do not worry my Dear; Miss Martin will be here when you return from your lessons."

Looking to me for reassurance I respond "I must follow doctor's orders." Satisfied with my answer Josephine gets up off the bed and walks to the door, as she is about to take her governesses hand she turns back looks at me and runs to my side.

Scrambling up the bed she gives me a hug and a kiss, looking up at me through her thick lashes she says "You will not leave will you?" I say "No, no I will not I promise." With a shy smile upon her face, she takes her leave.

Closing the door behind her Vanessa returns to my side, but this time she sits on the chair beside the

bed. With a stern and extremely serious expression upon her face she asks "Who are you, and how did you come to be on our property?" Shocked and confused I do not know what to say. Seeing my surprise at her question she asks me "Is your name really Nicolette Martin?"

"Yes that is my name or rather what most people know me as. Some have a rather difficult time saying my real name properly."

"What is your real name?"

"It is Nikolina Martinovic."

"Oh that is a mouth full" she giggles.

In regard to your second question, I do not know, and if I told you how I think I got here you would think I was mad."

"Well why do you not give it a try?" Vanessa says with an encouraging smile upon her face.

Contemplating whether she should, Nikolina looks at Vanessa's eyes and she realizes she could never lie to Vanessa. Unable to understand why she feels so

compelled to tell Vanessa the truth her voice falters, in order to calm herself down she takes a deep breath. "Alright but first you have to tell me what today's date is?"

Vanessa smiles and says "April 13, th 1814 you have been asleep for well over a day". Taken back by the shock of the date, Nikolina mind is reeling, 1814 almost two hundred years in the past.

Regaining her composure she begins her story, fascinated yet not appearing dismissive Vanessa listens intently. As the story of Nikolina's adventure comes to a close Vanessa rises from her chair and walks over to the window. A wave of panic flows through Nikolina as she realizes what a foolish choice she has made telling the Duchess such a ludicrous story. She doesn't know how she got there, why could she just not fake amnesia or laryngitis, buying herself some time. No she had to bare her soul to a perfect stranger, one who now holds her life in her hands. Turning her head away from the Duchess she chastises herself for being so stupid, stupid, stupid.

Vanessa stares out the window trying to process the story Nicolette just recounted, and what a story it is. Either this girl is completely mad or she is telling the truth. No one in their right mind would ever attempt to concoct such a farfetched tale, especially not one they would not be able to support with some form of proof. Vanessa reaches into her pocket and pulls out the three items that she found in Nicolette's bag. No one she has trusted enough to consult has been unable to decipher what the items are and most were scared to touch them at all. If the girl is able to tell her what they were perhaps she is really telling the truth. In the depths of her heart Vanessa truly hopes that the girl is not a liar and, that her story is true. For some unconceivable reason she feels a true fondness for the girl and would hate to see her sent away.

The anticipation is killing Nikolina, she is ready to scream. With her future teetering before her it is almost too much to bear, but she is unable to speak for the fear that the Duchess will not believe her if she tries to convince her further. At that moment Vanessa turns around and walks to Nicolette, her

face a puzzle one that Nikolina is unable to interpret and she says.

"Is there any way that you can provide me with evidence to collaborate with your story?" Nicolette's mind spins and she is at a loss for words.

Seeing her guest is in shock Vanessa sets down the three items on to the bed and says "I hope that you do not mind we went through your things trying to identify who you are as well as if you were a threat to me and my family. Can you tell me what these items are they are rather fascinating?"

Relief washes over Nicolette as she sees the cell phone, IPod and camera. Seeing the guilty look on the Duchess face she reassures her "Oh no it is alright I do not mind, if I were in your place I would have done the same thing".

Picking up the first item Nikolina explains 'This is a cell phone we use it to communicate with one another, like a letter only instantaneous. Try to imagine that we were speaking to one another as we are now, except that you are on another room,

another city, or another continent yet you hear me perfectly as if I was standing right beside you."

"How riveting."

" There is also an option to write to one another called texting, it is as if you are writing a letter yet the person to whom you are sending it to receives it within a few seconds. You see I can type a message and I can send it to anyone and they would receive it and be able to respond."

"And what is this one called" Vanessa says pointing to the camera?

"This is a camera it can capture images and I can see them instantaneously. Here let me show you, sit nicely in that chair and smile as if I was painting your portrait. You will see a flash please do not be scared and make sure not to blink." Nicolette takes the picture; Vanessa is stunned by the blinding flash, blinking away she panics because she cannot see. Comforting her Nicolette assures her "Do not fret your vision will return in a minute. Just close your eyes until the bright spots disappear."

As her vision returns Vanessa inquires with a great curiosity "May I see the picture?"

Nicolette switches the camera over to the gallery but the first picture is not one of Vanessa but rather the picture of her family gathered round the table during Easter. Tears spring to her eyes at the very sight of them; Vanessa reaches out to comfort her. Regaining her composure she makes the image come back on.

"We cannot look at all the pictures I do not know how long the battery, the power source will last, after so many falls the solar charger might be broken." explains Nicolette.

Flipping through the pictures she explains "This is my family we are gathered round the dinner table, my mother, father, sister; aunts and uncles."

"What strange clothes you wear."

"Yes, as do you, you should have seen my expression when I saw you and Josephine by the lake. The sight of the two of you made me stop in my tracks. I was so stunned that I did not hear the horse approach me."

The next few picture are of the park "My violets came out splendid" exclaims Nikolina. "So haunting and mysterious they would have looked perfect gracing the wall in my living room."

Fascinated Vanessa looks on in awe, turning to Nikolina she says "I believe you, for some strange and unconceivable reason I actually believe you. You must tell me all about the future, you simply must."

Laughing out of relief as tears overflow and streak down her face, she is grasped into a tight hug as Vanessa whispers "All will be well you may stay as long as you need to and we will all help you find your way home, wherever or whenever that may be."

Shaking her head in thanks Nikolina smiles. Returning to the camera she flips to the very last picture which is that of Vanessa, turning it over Nikolina shows it to the Duchess and she is stunned; "That is me, oh that is a marvelous contraption it is far better than any mirror isn't it. I look rather fetching don't you think."

"Yes you do quite regal" I say with a laugh.

The last item that she picks up is my IPod. "What a beautiful color."

"It is my favorite color" I say, "The color matches this room exactly". This is an IPod it contains many songs and pieces of music. You can choose from thousands of songs. "There was a green wire with it do you have it?"

"Oh yes is this it?" She says as she pulls the lime green wire earphones out of her pocket. I plug the ear phones in and I set to a composition of music I know she would be familiar with Ludwig Van Beethoven's 'Moonlight Sonata'. Putting the buds in her ears I press play. Vanessa smiles at me with amazement. "This is wonderful, amazing; my goodness what wonders await us."

A soft knock interrupts Vanessa as a maid enters "Pardon me your Grace, the chef wishes to know when you wish the dinner be served".

"Oh yes of course I almost forgot. Please tell Monsieur Gaston that dinner is to be served in an hour."

As the maid turns to leave Vanessa continues "Emily, do set an extra place for Miss. Martin she will be joining us for dinner. Also please have Olivia assist her in preparation, I will see to her attire." Emily takes her leave as she closes the door Vanessa says "It is time for you to get out of bed and stretch your legs. If you are to stay with us you will have to learn our ways, you cannot stay hidden in this room. Your chamber maid Olivia will draw you a bath while I find you a suitable dress to wear that which you came to us in with will simply not do."

As Vanessa exits the room she replies "The hardest part of this is over."

Olivia enters "Madame I am your chamber maid I was sent to assist you. I will draw you a bath; do you prefer lilac or rose scented water?"

Stammering Nikolina replies "Rose please."

Following Olivia in to the bath chamber she is in awe, the whole bathroom is covered in white marble accented with deep purple veins. Off to the side is a beautiful classic iron claw foot tub into which the

maid is pouring piping hot water. As the water hits the tub the aroma of the roses fills the air.

"The water must cool for a wee bit; once it is ready I will let you know Miss"

"Thank you Olivia but please call me Nicolette of better yet Nina."

"Thank you Miss though I do believe it would not be deemed proper. "Retorts Olivia.

"Proper or not when it is just the two of us like this please do not call me Miss. or Madame only Nicolette."

"Yes Mi.. Nicolette" Nina smiles at the slip up. "Good I am glad that we have that out of the way, now if you do not mind I will explore the bed chamber a bit.

Nina walks back into the bed room and for the first time sees it for what it is, taken back by the intricacy of the plaster ceilings, the crown molding. The contrast of the violet and the white is mesmerizing. Windows cover one wall almost completely. There is also a balcony, wrapping around the corner the room occupies. Walking over Nina opens the wide French

doors and steps into the sun. Her senses are invaded by the delicate scents of spring. From the balcony she sees the meadow where she woke up under the cherry tree.

"Miss Nicolette please come back inside it is unseemly for you to be out dressed so scantily." Shrugging her shoulders she looks down at herself she notes 'at least I'm wearing my black and pink matching bra and underwear set'.

She walks back into the room and walks straight into the bath. Slipping in she feels her muscles relax, as Olivia is washing her hair, never pampered like this Nina is a bit embarrassed.

Rinsing herself off she hears the door to the bedroom open, and Vanessa walks I with Josephine in tow. "I think we found you a dress." she calls from the other room "it has been rather cumbersome as you are much taller than I." We had to have it let out a bit I think it will look splendid on you."

Donning on a dressing robe Nina walks into the room and sees a gorgeous deep violet satin gown laying on the bed. As she nears the bed she sees intricacies of

velvet as well as silk pleating on the bodice of the gown. Never in her life has she seen something so beautiful. Rendered speechless she just nods and smiles as her eyes are brimmed over with tears. Overwhelmed by their kindness and generosity she reaches out and hugs Vanessa whispering, "Thank you."

"We will leave you to dress; Olivia will show you the way to the dining room. "Says Vanessa as she ushers Josephine out of the room.

Brushing her hair Olivia inquires "What style she would you like to wear your hair?"

"I don't think we should put it up just yet my head still hurts and I do not wish to aggravate my injury."

"I agree Miss Nicolette." Olivia continues to brush her hair until it shimmer in its copper tones then pins the sides away from Nina's face with mother of pearl combs. "If you please follow me I will show you to the dining room."

Chapter 3.

For the first time since coming to Crescentferd Nina leaves her room, as she descends the grand staircase she is entranced by the majesty of the manor. The intricate plaster ceilings and cornices are even more beautiful than in her room; the colors; the tapestries, the paintings, she wishes she could stay and examine them all further. Olivia brings her out of hypnotized state as she nudges her down the stairs toward the dining room doors. The footman ceremoniously opens the door and announces her; she walks in to see Josephine and Vanessa sitting patiently waiting for her. Josephine almost jumps out of her chair but her mother's gentle touch reins her in.

"You look beautiful! Doesn't she Momma?" Josephine says excitedly her green eyes twinkling brightly.

"Yes, yes she does. That color rather suits you don't you think Nina ?" inquires Vanessa

Blushing Nina responds "Yes I do, it is my favorite color. Again I cannot thank you enough for all of this; I do not know how I will ever repay you."

"Oh nonsense my dear you bring quite an aura of excitement to our rather dreary lives. Ever since my

husband left we have been in a rather saddened state. Poor Tristan misses him so, we hoped to distract him with a trip to his grandmothers but I do think he is relieved that he will be coming home sooner than expected."

"I am sorry to hear about your husband I do hope that his passing was not too traumatizing for the children; little Josephine seems to be taking it rather well."

"Oh Goodness no you misunderstood my husband has not passed on he is away on business. Usually he is only gone for one or two weeks, though due to complications at two of the properties, he has been gone for well over a month. I did receive a letter from him yesterday and you will be glad to learn that he should be returning in a week." Seeing the panic flash across Nina 's face Vanessa rises from her seat and gently guides the startled girl to her seat.

Returning to her own seat she continues "Oh do not worry my dear we will slowly let him in on our secret, though we will have to deceive him for a while just to see how believable our story is to others.

He will be miffed but once I explain why we did it I am sure he will be glad to participate in our little intrigue."

"We will have to think of what to tell my friends, but first let us enjoy this delectable meal I do hope that you enjoy our cuisine. We did not know if you liked or disliked anything in particular so the chef tried to make a meal that is not so adventurous."

"Oh no need to worry about me, there are very few things that I do not eat, I am not very picky."

"I am glad to hear that well Bon Appétit my dear."

As they are enjoying their dinner, Josephine regales them about adventures of days past. All her chatter lifts Nina's spirits as she slowly forgets her troubles.

"My Goodness I did not realize how hungry was until I smelled the mouth-watering food. That was simply delicious, my compliments to their chef he must give me the recipe." Says Nina much satiated.

"The chef will be glad to hear that Monsieur Gaston is rather nervous and frantic about pleasing his

patrons. If there is anything in particular that you enjoy please feel free to request it from him."

"Now let us get to the task in hat hand, however will we introduce you into my circle of friends?"

"No your Grace there is no need for that, I am more than happy to just be allowed to stay here in attempts to find my way home."

"Nonsense my dear I have decided to make it my mission that if you are to return to your own time, you shall have the experience of a lifetime. I will not hear another word about this. You do not know yet Nina but when I put my mind to something I am rarely swayed."

Laughing out loud Nina retorts "Well then we have something in common, I am extremely thick headed as well."

"Nicolette your accent is very American though am I wrong to say that in the short time that you have been with a bit of English has crept in?"

Nodding her head Nicolette answers "I do have a problem; I assimilate to whatever accent I hear. I do not do it on purpose, it is an unconscious reaction."

"That is perfect my dear, an American with English roots." She says excitedly.

Mulling over her past statement "No...we could not do that, it could be confirmed. Your name Nikolina is very unusual what nationality is that?"

"I am Croatian, Martinovic is as Croatian as you get."

"Did you ever live there? Do you speak the language?"

"Yes I lived and was educated there; I am fluent in Croatian as well as in Italian. I would gladly teach the children, I have always believed that your intelligence is measured by how many languages you speak."

"And why do you think that?" asks Vanessa.

"Because for you to be fluent you have to understand the people behind the language and that is truly one of the hardest things to learn. Though Croatian might

not be very useful to the children right now it does open doors to other Slavic languages."

"Then it is settled you will teach Tristan and Josephine both languages as well as things that you have learned in the future, and they will teach you the things you will need to know in order to be able to fit in."

"In order for you to be accepted into society quicker perhaps we should give you a title? Is it wrong of me to assume that Croatia has its own noble line of which you could be a descendent of?"

"I do believe that Croatia has a noble line, although in my time they hold no power it is just a formal title. In my time there is a family of Duke's with the sure name Martin from a city very close to mine."

"What do you think? Do you think it could be verified in any way?" asks Vanessa.

"I am not sure if it can be verified, though is it not a criminal offense to impersonate nobility?"

"Well then we will leave that for now, we shall seek Declyn's advice on this matter. So what will we tell

my friends, when they ask us how we know each other?"

Answering her own question Vanessa continues "Let's see we met in Paris while I lived there with my aunt. We met one day while on a shipping jaunt and we became fast friends. A week later you left for the Americas and we have been corresponding through letters ever since" schemes up Vanessa, quite proud of her quick thinking.

"That sounds believable" agrees Nina .

"But why are you here?" retorts Vanessa still deeply in thought.

"Hmm... how about my father sent me back to Croatia in hopes that I will find a suitable husband. A young man who courted me quite profusely became rather obsessed when I rejected him and he kidnapped me. He planned to marry me against my will and or taint me so no other man would have me, therefore I would have no choice but to marry him. I learned of this plan and thwarted it by escaping. In fear that he would find me I could not contact any friends that he might know about. So I came to

England to the place you wrote of, I could not write to you of my visit in fear that he would learn of my plan."

"My dear that is genius, brilliant; it explains my surprise and the fact that we have not corresponded in a long time; your lack of clothes and valuables. Well now that we have covered all of that we need to start putting together a wardrobe for you, one that is tailored to you and of course in the latest fashions. Oh I must contact Madame Soleigh I hope she will be able to come and do the fittings herself. You will need day and night dresses; ball gowns; matching shoes and a proper riding habit; bonnets and fur shawls and jewels. Ohh... This is so exciting! Do not worry about a thing we will get you ready for the season."

In her whirlwind of excitement Vanessa is unaware of Nina trying to dissuade her from her plan. Finally turning to Nina she is surprised that she is not sharing in her excitement "Nicolette why do you look so pained?"

"I feel rather uncomfortable you doing all this for me without me having any way to repay you."

"I do not want to hear another word about it; did we not just agree that you will share your knowledge with my children. What you know is more precious and a greater gift that anything that I could buy you with the crown jewels of England. Plus you have lightened our spirits that is worth more than anything to me right now."

Pulling on her mother's skirts' Josephine reminds her mother "In my excitement I almost forgot Josephine wishes to give you a tour of the grounds, so off you go and I will see if I can make any arrangements for today if not the fun will start tomorrow."

Taking her hand Josephine escorts her out of the dining room and shows her to the kitchens.

"I am so delighted that you have finally felt well enough to come out of your quarters."

"As am I, this is such a treat for me, so where are we going?"

"Well you said that you wished to meet Monsieur Gaston and thank him from the yummy meal."

"Oh yes that would be nice."

"And while we are here I will introduce you to the rest of the staff, so that your time here is made easier."

"Here we are." She says as she opens the door to the kitchens.

It appears that the whole kitchen staff has congregated in the kitchens to gossip about the new addition to the household.

"I heard that she is running away from the law..."

"Well I heard that her family is so desperate for her to get married, that they sent her here to play the pauper knowing that her Grace would take pity and help marry her off. Is it not obvious that she is here to be as close as possible to the most eligible bachelor in all of England?" says the laundry maid.

As Nina and Josephine come through the door the staff gets to their feet most with an apologetic face all but the laundry maid Kristine. She raises her head high staring Nicolette down.

Pretending not to have heard a thing Nicolette walks in with Josephine.

"Hello everyone" quips Josephine. Turning to the staff she is beaming "This is Miss. Nicolette Martin, she is a friend of my mothers."

"Unanimously the staff curtsy as well as bows to Nicolette save for one.

"What could have I possibly done to deserve such scorn from a woman I do not even know" Nina thinks to herself.

Completely disregarding the obvious insult to her she turns to Josephine.

"Will you please introduce me to the staff; if I am to stay here I would like to know each and every one of them."

Turning to her now rather captive audience she says "Though you will have to forgive me I am horrible with remembering names. So I will apologize in advance if I get your names wrong. Please feel free to correct me, at any time."

"This is the head Chef Monsieur Gaston." Says Josephine

"Oh it is a pleasure to meet you, I must congratulate you on the scrumptious meal, it was a feast for the senses."

Blushing he takes off his hat wringing it in his hands he bows "Merci, Madame Merci, it iz a great plezure tu cook for such a butifull vouman."

Giggling Nina replies "Thank you! You must give me the recipe for the baby duck it was absolutely delicious."

"Zi yong Miss iz well versed in zi coulinary arts? Se magnifique, Madame u are quite velcome en mon kitsion when eve u desire."

"I will definitely take you up on that offer Chef."

In the mean time the staff has lined up according to their station and Nicolette is introduced to them all.

"Hmm so my accuser and obviously the most malicious person here is also the lowest one on the rung of the household staff. Kristine is not my favorite name in the world go figure this one is staying true to her name. Well I hope that she has had her fill and will stop with this nonsense as well

as the ridiculous gossip she has started." Nicolette thinks to herself.

"Well it was a pleasure to meet you all but I do believe it is time for us to continue our tour. Josephine has kindly volunteered to show me the beautiful estate."

Slowly Nina and Josephine take their leave and ascend the stair case. This time she pauses beside each masterpiece and inquires of Josephine as to who and what they are of. She is amazed Josephine is well versed in the arts. Managing to drag Nina up the grand staircase on to the second floor she takes her to her room.

Entering as the sun is setting over the horizon the view takes Nina's breath away. Josephine's room is painted in a butter yellow which is deeper and more accented by the setting sun. There is intraquite plaster work all over the walls as well as the ceiling; the motives are of what appear to be scenes from fairy tales and various woodland creatures. In the center of the room is a precious canopy bed draped in silks of the softest pink.

Josephine runs in to the left corner of the room and sits down while Nina is left admiring the room from the doorway. Turning to Nina she calls to her and says "Do not loiter in the doorway, come see my treasure chest".

Smiling at her and the seriousness of the statement Nina does as she is told. As she approaches Josephine and attempts to sit down beside her. Not used to the voluminous skirts and hoops she does not quite know how to. After much maneuvering she plops down and settles next to Josephine.

"A treasure chest indeed" remarks Nina admiring the chest covered in gold's, amethyst and rose quarts. As Josephine opens it, it is overflowing with toys none of which have seen the light of day in over 200 years. "Let's play dollies" Josephine pleads with her eyes.

Responding Nina says "Why don't you show me the rest of your home and we will play later, before you go to bed."

Agreeing Josephine gets up and says "Let's go."

Exiting the room they see Vanessa walking up the staircase. "There you are I have been trying to find the two of you to tell you the good news. First Madame Soleigh will be coming tomorrow bright and early for your first fitting." Taking Nina by the hand she continues "Initial fittings are quite trying and extensive. Madame Soleigh is not the most patient woman but she is the best. She is the most sought after seamstress in all of London. If it was not for Declyn helping her out in her time of need and investing into her business, I do not know how we would have gotten an appointment. She is quite a character and I must warn you, she is crass and speaks her mind so do not take her comments to heart my dear. Now what were you two doing when I so rudely interrupted you?"

"Well Josephine was showing me her room and we were about to continue the tour."

"Now Josephine it is rather sweet that you wish to continue the tour but it is getting very close to your bed time so I do believe that it is time for you to say

goodnight to Nicolette you can continue your tour tomorrow."

"But Mummy" Josephine begins to interject but with a patient look from Vanessa manages to silence her rebuff.

"Do not fret my love, tomorrow after my fittings we will go for a long walk and I will tell you a lovely story" I try to comfort the now pouting child.

"Which story? I have heard them all." She says stubbornly as she crosses her arms and pouts.

"Have you ever heard the story of the Little Mermaid?"

"The Little Mermaid I do not believe that I have" says Josephine still trying to recall such a story.

"Well then off to bed with you, the faster you fall asleep the quicker tomorrow will come and I will regale you with the stories of the mischievous little mermaid."

"Very well then I bid you both a good night." Turning to her mother she raises her hands gesturing for her

mother to pick her up. She hugs Vanessa and places a gentle peck upon her cheek.

As Vanessa lowers her back to the ground I bend down; Josephine puts her cherub hands around my neck and gives me a tight squeeze as well as a kiss on the cheek. Loosening her grip she puts her hands on either side of my face and with a stern look she says "It had better be a good story." Laughing out loud I say "It will be; I will even sing you the songs which accompany the story."

"Oh goody" Josephine responds clasping her hands together in joy.

"Josephine I will be there to tuck you in, in a few minutes" Says Vanessa.

Walking away towards the drawing room Nina says "I believe I will retire for the night as well. It has been a rather taxing day emotionally as well as physically. I cannot believe the emotional rollercoaster that I have been on in just a few hours. It feels as if days have flown by."

"Well I cannot begin to imagine how you must feel so I will not even try to guess. Go and rest my dear tomorrow is just the beginning of your new life with us. It must be so exciting to have a fresh start, a blank slate. You can be anyone is it not exciting?"

"Yes and no, I think I would describe it more as nerve wracking. I fear that I will be found out and locked away somewhere where I will not be able to seek my way back home. Though I do appreciate all that you are doing for me I am still quite intent on returning back to my own time."

"Of course my dear I will help you, we will all help you in any way that we know and can, just let us know what you need and we will try to supply you with it."

Nina stops and turns she hugs Vanessa "For the lack of better words Thank You, for your friendship and for all of your help. I must have been born under a lucky star if I was fortunate enough to have my path cross yours in my greatest hour of need. Good night Vanessa I shall see you in the morning." Letting go

she turns and leaves not wanting Vanessa to see the raw emotion which is displayed on her face.

"Goodnight my dear and sweet dreams" she whispers as Nina retreats back to her quarters.

Closing the door behind her for the first time Nina lets herself be overwhelmed by the emotions which have surfaced. She had been fighting them back but now in the solace of her room she sets them free. With her back still against the door she slowly slides down to the floor weeping.

"I just want to go home" how cliché she thinks to herself "I really just want my mommy". She continues to weep silencing her sobs in the folds of her dress. Realizing that she is making quite a bit of noise she fears that someone might hear, once she regains some composure she gets up and moves away from the door. Walking across the room she is stripping off the gown and all her dinner paraphernalia. By the time she reaches the foot of the bed she is left in nothing but her undergarments as she crawls into her soft bed. Self pity, melancholy

and sheer emotional exhaustion take over as she cries herself to sleep.

Chapter 4.

Dear D,

Yes I am actually refusing to start this first entry with Dear Diary, it is so corny, I feel like a 5th grader. I simply can't bring myself to do it.

I had a very strange dream last night, one that saddened me to the very core. The dream was about my family and how they were still searching for me. They were devastated that they have yet to hear from me, or for that matter find a shred of evidence to help them in their search.

It was a very voyeuristic dream; one in which I was a ghost, made to watch my family be torn apart by my disappearance but unable to help to comfort them. In my mind I thought that if I was able to give them a sign I could prove that I was there, and so I screamed , I tried to move things ,I did everything I could but no one could see that I was there. And so I

wept with them, I wept for them and for myself, I was torn for I could do nothing but watch.

Waking from that nightmare I came to the realization that I have been neglecting the promise that I made when I found myself in this predicament. So I have made a decision that I will start my search; begin looking for a way home. I will use all that I know as well as all resources available to me. I am well aware that it will not be easy nor am I guaranteed to succeed but I owe it to them to try.

The worst part is that I don't know where to start. Perhaps the best place to start is in the very beginning, recount all that I had heard and seen that day in the park. There must have been something that I missed, something that at that moment was inconsequential but knowing what I know now could be monumental.

Well the fog was definitely strange that I know, I have never in my life heard of such a thing. And it came out of nowhere so thick, spreading from the ground up. Usually fog descends not ascends. It was definitely unusual. Where is Google when you need

it? I bet there are dozens of articles, blogs and sites about such strange occurrences.

The second strangest thing was that ray of light; it was like a beacon calling to me. I had originally thought to just turn and walk back the way I came, if I had just kept walking I would eventually reach the end of the park and be on a street somewhere. But I couldn't it was like a sirens call drawing me in. Once I looked at the light I felt an instantaneously pull , all my previous thought were erased and all I wanted to do was go into it.

The closer I got to the light the louder was the buzzing noise. Once inside the light it became quite pronounced. At the time I didn't notice it but thinking back I just thought that it was just my ears ringing from the change of pressure. As I have always been sensitive to changes of weather I thought nothing of it. Fog has always given me migraines but when I walked into the light the pain increased tenfold, it became too much for my body to bare, I felt so nauseous and that is when I passed out.

When I woke up I still remember hearing the noise but I figured it was just my ears buzzing form the rush of blood back to my head. Hmm... I wonder if that buzzing sound identifies the location of the wormhole. When the fitting is over I'll go and explore the meadow to see if I can feel the same kind of pressure or hear the buzzing. If I'm lucky the wormhole is still there just hidden unless you know what you are looking for.

I awoke buy the cherry tree I wonder if that is where the worm hole deposited me or if I rolled or fell. God I wish I could remember more.

Getting up Nicolette walks over to the balcony putting on her dressing robe she walks out into the sunlight to see if she can see anything unusual from that vantage point. The meadow is still sparkling with droplets of undisturbed morning dew. Looking at her watch she sees that it is still early 7am; all is quiet as the hustle and bustle is contained within the house as the house staff begins to prepare for a new day. Since Olivia has yet to come to wake her, she decides to enjoy what little time she has left before

she is summoned to breakfast and dragged to her fitting.

Hearing the sound of horses and a rather noisy coach approaching from the street below, curiosity gets the best of her as she sets the book down on the bench and peers round the corner to see who it is. Just as she reaches the corner of the balcony she hears Olivia enter the room, she sounds rather flustered.

"Miss, Miss you must wake up Madame Soleigh is here, you must get ready quickly. There will be no time for you to breakfast, I apologize Miss Nina I forgot to wake you." Pulling back the sheets as she sees Nina is not there.

Nina walks back into the room just as Olivia is about to have a fit. "Calm down Olivia I am up, help me get dressed there is no need to panic."

"Oh my lady you are too kind, now let's get you into a shift and corset, you need to don proper undergarments Madame Soleigh will not take kindly to you wearing anything else."

"Alright Olivia lets go."

While Nina is getting dressed all is rather quiet and from time to time Nina notices that Olivia is blushing deep shades of crimson as well as looks rather uncomfortable.

"Olivia what is wrong? Are you ill?"

"It is nothing Miss." She responds now her cheeks are an ever deeper shade of red.

"Well it must be something I hope that you are not upset about this morning; I told you I am not angry with you. I rather enjoyed having a few minutes to myself. Did I tell you about my dream?"

Shaking her head Olivia responds "No."

"Truth be told it was more a nightmare than a dream." Still not satisfied with Olivia's answer Nina continues to push and probe to see what is the matter.

As Olivia is brushing her hair Nina grabs her hand and guides her around until they are facing each other.

"Livy please tell me, I do not like to see you so perplexed. Is it something that I said, was it something I did?"

"No Miss. You have been wonderful. I am extremely lucky to be employed by such a good mistress."

"Then what is it? I will not leave this room until you tell me. So you better start talking!" Taking a page out of Josephine's handbook Nina crosses her hands over her chest and firmly plants herself in the chair."

"Oh no, no miss you must go now."

"I am waiting!!!!!"

On the verge of tears Olivia confesses "I am so sorry about last night you must be so vexed with me for not standing up for you."

"Oh" says Nina the onslaught of the words coming back to her.

Hanging her head in shame Olivia puts her face in her hands as she begins to weep. "I knew that you must have heard but I had hoped that you did not.

They are vile gossiping shrews. It is just so hard to stand up to them."

Olivia collapses to her knees and lays her head on Nina 's lap.

"Olivia that is very sweet of you, but I can fight my own battles. And the gossip that they spewed I'm sure has crossed everyone's mind. As long as those who truly matter know the truth then I'm not concerned. I do not want you to be at odds with them. If we ignore them perhaps they will stop, if not I will think of something. In the mean time I do not want you to feel guilty about anything."

"Oh Miss Nicolette I hope that you are right. They are evil to the core and they are so hateful."

"But why, whatever have I done to them?

"You are here and her Grace took you in. They are extremely jealous as they do not think you are of noble birth."

"In other words they wish they were me. If they only knew what that entails."

Realizing how late they are Olivia gets to her feet. "We must go Miss., please."

"Let us go, lead the way Livy. Do you mind if I call you Livy?"

Turning her head back to Nina Olivia answers with a smile "No I do not mind, I like Livy no one has ever called me that!"

As she is answering Nina's question she opens the door and finds Kristine stumbling back, away from the door.

"Good morning Kristine, may we help you?" Says Olivia shocked and angry that she found her snooping.

"No"

With her most blinding and friendly smile upon her lips Nina asks "Are you here to summon us?"

"No I am not."

"I can't believe that she is still acting holier than though even now when she has been caught

eavesdropping, unbelievable the gall of some people." Nina thinks to herself.

"Then get back downstairs there is much to be done today." Says Olivia.

"Go Livy!" Nina thinks to herself. "Though I hope that you will not be paying for it later."

In a huff Kristine turns and takes the servant's stairs as we proceed down the main stairway.

Now horribly late we are intercepted on the stairs by Josephine "Where have the two of you been! You must hurry; she is not very patient today."

Flying down the stairs as fast as their feet can carry them they come to a sudden stop right in front of the door to Vanessa's drawing room. They smack one into the other "It's like a scene out of the three stooges" Nina thinks to herself as they erupt into a fit of giggles.

At the sound of the ruckus outside Vanessa rushes to the door and not waiting for the footman to open the door she lets the girls in. She chides each with a stern look as they pass through the doorway.

Vanessa closes the door and says "Madame Soleigh it is my pleasure to introduce you to.."

Cutting her of Madame Soleigh makes her way to the front of the room as her assistants' part like the red see allowing her to pass. "Well it is about time that you graced us with your presence." She says in a rather mocking tone.

"Do you think that I have nothing better to do than to wait on a pampered little chit such as yourself? You are on my time not I on yours. Now get over here so that we can start this fitting, I am a busy woman and I do not have time for such shenanigans."

Taken back by her tone and manner Nina is left momentarily speechless. After a few seconds she regains her senses as she assesses the situation.

"Apologies Madam, I did not mean any disrespect with my tardiness. It will not happen again."

As the words come out of her mouth, the whole room is stunned into silence. Shocked that the girl had enough class to apologize, instead of turning her nose up or simply regarding her as a crazed old

servant who is only tolerated until she is needed. Madame Soleigh turns to Nina "I am glad to hear that, now get your bum up on that pedestal so that I can see what I have to work with."

As Nina passes her Madame Soleigh slaps her on the bottom to get her to move faster.

Nina gives a little yelp and giggles as she steps up on the pedestal.

"And I thought I had a heavy hand, I feel sorry for anyone who gets on your bad side." Continues Nina .

"When you deal with a bunch of over privileged little brats as I do, you learn that it is easier to just beat them into submission that coax them with honey."

"Have you never heard of the term you catch more bees with honey than you do with vinegar."

"Oh yes a lovely saying that is" she says wistfully "but these are no honey bees, with a few exceptions of course." She adds with a wink to Vanessa and Josephine.

"Ah... yes I can see where your problem lies. You probably figure that it is easier to deal with them if they fear you."

"You got yourself a sharp one here your Grace." She says in a sarcastic tone.

"Oh you do not even know, Evangeline."

"What a beautiful name, you have" comments Nina.

"You are barking up the wrong tree my dear, flattery will get you nowhere."

As if she did not hear the last comment Nina continues "You would think it belonged to someone as gentle as a flower not as deadly as a wasp."

The whole room is a gasp, every mouth is gaping all except for that of Madame Soleigh.

"Well I see that we have our work cut out for us. This is no weeping willow girls; this one has been fed far too well. I hope you are not responsible for this Vanessa."

Shaking her head Vanessa responds "No that is how she came to us" as she suppresses a giggle.

"She's got the broad shoulders of a butcher and the bottom and thighs of wench who has been stuffing her face with far too many pies."

The room is so quiet you can hear a pin drop. Nina replies "Well there's a pot calling a kettle black."

As the words leave her mouth she turns to look at Evangeline face to face and they both burst into fits of laughter.

"Oh I like this one Vanessa she's got spirit. She reminds me of you in your younger spunkier days."

"I thought you might, now let's get to work, there is not time to waste. Do you think you will be able to provide us with what we need in time for the first ball?"

"She has a quite admirable figure that tiny waist will sure drive them mad, and as I said before her bum I quite pronounced, she will not need artificial padding so that will cut our time in half."

"Well I am glad it is good for something." Nina says winking at Josephine who is suppressing a giggle.

"I have a few drawings that I prepared, but looking at her now I do believe we will have to make some alterations to my original designs."

"You see my dear" says Evangeline to Nina "each of my pieces is unique, not one girls needs to fret that another will be wearing the same gown."

"Marie bring over the sketch book."

"Come here my dear let us see what we can do." She calls to Nina .

Nina , Vanessa as well as Josephine walk over to the drawings.

"These are beautiful, my goodness you are extremely talented I had no idea". Picking up a scarlet number Nina marvels at the detail of the drawing.

"I love the caped sheer sleeves; the folds and pleating are gorgeous. Pointing to the swatches attached to the page he asks are these the material samples?"

"Yes what do you think?"

"Simply divine. I love it. Though if I may I have a few suggestions."

"Well what do you have in mind?"

"Instead of the capped sleeves why not make it a corset with valance selves made of the same sheer material; I am going to guess silk. And then there can be a sash of the same material draped along the back of the dress right below the shoulder blades."

"Ah yes that is an interesting concept. Hmm....I like it, it is very different. Have you ever done this before? You have a good eye."

"Thank you."

"I like this crimson one as well as the green one it brings out my eyes do you agree?"

"Yes I concur, and I think that the capped sleeves would look much better on this one. The hem should be slightly elongated as you are much taller than I thought you would be. I have the measurements for the day dresses if you allow me to I will gladly pick the material as well as the colors for them."

"Well after seeing how talented you are I think I can with full confidence allow you to pick what you think is best. But if I may be so bold as to request a color?"

"But of course, please."

"I would like a purple and or violet dress. Please no pink or orange, those are the only colors that I cannot stand to wear."

"Thank you that is good for me to know. Well I think that is all for today. When I have everything ready for your fitting I will call on you again. It has been a pleasure my dear I will see you soon."

"Likewise, I look forward to seeing your sketches come to life."

As the fitting draws to a close Josephine reminds Nicolette of her promise.

"Yes my dear we will go for the walk shortly, I am famished first I would like to breakfast and then don one of the gorgeous creations Madame Soleigh brought for me. Then when we walk Madame Soleigh out, we will continue on to the meadow."

"Please call me Evangeline, you have earned it. Just do not do so in front of others whom I service I don't want them to get any crazy ideas."

"Yes Madame!" Nina playfully salutes the seamstress. "May I please have my dress?"

"I will see if they have finished with the alterations." She says to Nicolette turning to her staff she walks over to see the progress of their work. After a few minutes she returns dress in hand.

"Now let us see how it fits." She lets Nicolette step into the gown and as she buttons and hooks up the back. She exclaims "Simply perfection, if I say so myself!."

Turning to the mirror Nicolette is stunned and rendered speechless.

"I always knew that I was meant to wear such dresses, I was so born in the wrong era."

Blushing she says "Madame you have simply outdone yourself. After seeing this I cannot wait to see what is in store for me in the near future." She turns and hugs the proud seamstress. The strangely tender moment is broken as Josephine tugs on Nina 's dress "May we go NOW?"

"Did your mother not teach you that patience is a virtue? Greatness cannot be rushed!" exclaims Evangeline.

"Oh she is just excited that we will be spending the day outdoors. I promised her a story and she is eager to hear it."

"Hmm... well none the less she should be mindful when adults are conversing."

"My apologies Madame for my outburst." says Josephine with a curtsy.

"It is all right my child I remember what it was like to be your age." replies Madame Soleigh.

"Why don't you go and fetch me a bit of bread and cheese and a piece of fruit and we will be off. I will not make you wait while I eat."

"I will wait for you by the stables."

"I will meet you there shortly Josephine."

As Madame Soleigh's assistants pack up the materials Vanessa, Nina and Evangeline are discussing final decisions and arrangements for the next visit.

"Goodbye I hope to see you soon Nicolette."

"Goodbye it was a pleasure to work with you."

As the last of the chests are loaded on the coach the horses are spurred forward.

"Vanessa, I am off for my walk with Josephine, we will not be gone for too long."

"Not to worry dinner will not be for a while; we are delaying it for a bit so that we would be able to dine with Tristan. He is due back from his Grandmothers shortly."

"Oh that is right, I cannot wait to meet him properly, I fear that we did not get off on the best foot the last time we met. No pun intended there."

"He is excited to meet you."

"Well the feeling is mutual."

"Off you go then do not keep poor Josephine waiting she is not a very patient child.

Walking out the front door Nina realizes that she has never ventured outside. She hopes that she will be able to find the stables. "Well the smells should be

able to guide me" she thinks to herself. Turning around yet another bend she sees the back of the house with its massive terrace. "Exquisite like something out of a fairytale" she thinks to herself. As she crosses the beautifully manicured lawn she sees or rather smells the stables. Though the smell is becoming rather pungent it is being masque quite well by the massive garden of roses. Nina stops and smells the roses, the colors are simply gorgeous, they smell so fresh each with a unique bouquet which tantalizes the senses. Oh it is so nice to finally smell a rose. Walking over to a particularly frail looking rose, she is drawn in by a rather familiar scent. Closing her eyes she recalls the last time she actually smelled such perfection. "It's my rose! The one which bloomed under my bedroom window in Croatia.. oh it has been too long." She kneels beside it and immerses herself in its delicate white blooms. A smile spreads on her lips and she is transported to her childhood. "It was my responsibility to tend to the roses. My mother loved roses, our house was surrounded by them. I had two favorites the white one I called Chantilly Lace because of how delicate it

was. You could never pick the blooms to bring indoors they would just fall apart at first cut. And then there was the red rose I called Blood Velvet what a gorgeous color it was. The dark blood color petals were much hardier and thicker than Chantilly's, when you touched them they felt like velvet, its scent was not nearly as potent, regardless it was so beautiful. There was no one who passed by that would not stop to admire those two beauties."

A tap on her shoulder brings her back to the present "Josephine!! Oh I forgot" She turns to see the little girl not looking very patient. "Oh I am so sorry I was so drawn in by these booms that I did not realize so much time has passed."

"It is all right I love the rose bed too." Kneeling beside Nina she continues "I like to come here and pretend that I live in a rose castle. Mother loves roses when she comes across a particular rose she fancies she brings it home to add to our collection. Do you like this one?"

"Yes I do it reminds me of the rose I used to tend to when I was younger. My mother loves roses too. We

had many different kinds. Before we left Croatia for the last time I had just planted a cutting for a butter yellow rose and a beautiful violet colored one, I wonder how they are fairing."

Sensing her melancholy Josephine stands and pats Nina 's head "Do not be sad, come lets go and walk I wish for you to tell me the story of the Little Mermaid."

"Yes let us go." Standing she takes the bundle from Josephine and begins to munch on the bread and cheese. Coming to the meadow they sit under the willow tree beside the pond. "Alright so you wish to know the story of the little mermaid well here it goes. Once upon a time in a land beneath the sea, lived a curious and beautiful little mermaid named Ariel. Her hair was a stunning shade of red and she had beautiful green eyes just like you. She was the youngest daughter of King Triton ruler of the seven seas; Ariel was quite adventurous and rebellious. Our story starts on the day of the great festival for the Kings birthday. All the mer-people had gathered in the palace to enjoy the day's festivities. Sebastian

the crab who was the king's adviser prepared a beautiful concert in honor of the king in which he was to introduce the young mermaid to the masses. Ariel was well known to have a beautiful voice and for the first time that voice was going to be displayed for all to hear...."

As Nicolette goes on with her story she gets rather animated as she acts out the scenes and sings the songs which accompany the story. Josephine is enamored and delighted as Nicolette brings the story to life through her reenactment.

Halfway through the story and Nicolette's rendition of "A Part of your world" they are interrupted by a gallop of a horse. Turning Nina sees a young man on horseback. As he comes closer she realizes that it must be Tristan.

"It is Tristan Nicolette, he has come to say hello."

Coming to a halt a few yards away Tristan jumps off the horse and ties it to a nearby tree letting it graze.

"Madame" he says bowing to Nicolette, turning to his sister her nods his head "Josephine, mother has sent

me to come and fetch you, your presence has been requested."

"But Nina was in the middle of her story of the Little Mermaid, you always ruin everything!!" she says as she crosses her arms and pouts.

"Do not fret there will be plenty of time for me to finish the story."

Disregarding Josephine's rant he continues. "Miss. Martin I requested that I be the one to come and notify you that we have an unexpected dinner guest. My grandmother has decided to join us for dinner today."

"Oh... Well I guess we had better start heading back." says Nina looking rather flustered.

"Mother has asked that you do not return immediately she wishes to have some time with the Dowager Duchess herself."

"Thank you Tristan, I am grateful that you came to warn us even though I am sure you are quite weary from your trip."

"It was the least I could do for the woman who saved my life. I wish to formally apologize for my uncouth behavior; I should have never snuck up behind you in such a manner. I do hope that you can forgive me. "

"Oh think nothing of it my dear. I was just grateful that you were not hurt in that fall."

"Well I see that mother and Josephine finally let you out of your gilded prison. Is it safe to assume that you are well."

Laughing Nina replies "Yes I am thank you for inquiring, though I would not call it a prison."

"No? Well I would if I had to listen to Josephine prattle on, on about the most mundane things. She did not leave your side the whole time that you were unconscious. She drove us all mad with her insistence that she was keeping you company, even though the good doctor tried to explain to her that in your present state you were unaware of your surroundings. Her governess had quite a difficult time prying her away for her studies." He says with a laugh.

"You did hear me did you not Nina, tell him you did?"

"Well it is scientifically proven that comatose patients sometimes react to outside stimuli, such as music and a familiar voice. Perhaps that is why I feel so comfortable around you now my dear because I remember you keeping me company."

"See I told you so." says Josephine sticking her tongue out at Tristan.

"That is not very lady like behavior Josephine you mustn't do that."

"Oh she is not much of a lady!" exclaims Tristan as he runs away from Josephine just as she is about to give his shins a swift kick.

"Now, now children no fighting, Tristan tell me why has the Duchess decided to accompany you today?"

"Well she thinks that we are all under the weather because my father is still away. So instead of waiting a few more weeks to come and join us for the season she has decided to come with me today."

"Is it safe to say that your mother did not know anything about this."

"Oh I can assure you mother did not know. She is still trying to figure out how to introduce you to polite society she would not welcome such a distraction. Knowing that she would be unhappy about this unexpected turn of events I sent a footman with a message yesterday when I learned of the Dowagers plans, though it appears that he never made it."

Looking at her watch Nina sees that it is getting late and if they are to make it to dinner on time they had better start walking back.

"It is getting late I think it would be a good time to head back don't you think?"

"Yes I do especially since you do not have horses."

Passing by Tristan's horse Nina strokes his coat and says wistfully "I have always wanted to learn how to ride a horse."

"I will gladly teach you Miss."

"Please call me Nina ."

Alright Nina , would you like for me to teach you?"

"Yes I would like that very much; I only have one request I rather not learn how to ride side saddle."

Laughing out loud he continues "Well I think we can accommodate you. My mother is quite insistent on ridding in a man's saddle so do not worry you can too."

Walking back they are quite animated and laughing. Looking out the window of Dowagers bedroom Vanessa sees them and is relieved that Tristan does not harbor any ill feelings towards Nicolette.

"What is so interesting out there Vanessa?" the Dowager duchess inquires as she peers out the window.

"Oh nothing I was just watching the children walking back."

"Is that a new governess with them, she does not look familiar?"

"No that is a friend of mine who has come to stay with us for the season. Miss Nicolette Martin."

"Oh how nice that you have company. Is that why you do not seem as saddened as the last time I saw you? How long have you known Miss Martin?"

"Oh I met her 10 years ago while I was staying with my aunt in Paris. She left for the Americas not too long after our initial meeting, though we stayed in contact through letters and visits here and there. Truth be told it has been ages since I saw her last."

"Well I am surprised that you did not inform me of her visit the last time I was here."

"Her visit was a bit of a surprise to me as well, but a welcome one none the less."

"Josephine adores her and has not left her side. She has been a breath of fresh air to us all and a pleasant distraction from missing Declyn."

"Hmm... if you say so." Replies the dowager Duchess as she skeptical watches Nicolette and the children cross the great lawn.

"I look forward to meeting her. You really must be careful who you allow to consort with the children, they are quite impressionable at this young age."

"Viviane I do appreciate your concern but I do believe that I know what is best for my children. Nicolette is a quite worldly and she has agreed to share her knowledge with the children. She is a strong independent woman who has been through much in her life and I see her as a wonderful role model for Josephine. Not to mention a great example for Tristan to learn what a real woman is."

"I meant no disrespect Vanessa you are a wonderful mother."

"Thank you, I expect you to treat her kindly, she is my guest and I want her to feel at home."

"I understand and I will do my best to make her feel most welcome. Does Declyn know about your guest?"

"No he does not, she arrived after my last letter to him, and as he is on his way home now I saw no reason to inform him."

Turning to the door Vanessa continues "I will take my leave now and let you get settled. If you need anything please do not hesitate to ask. Dinner will be served in one hour."

"Thank you, I shall see you then."

Closing the door behind her Vanessa leans against it as she exhales deeply. Walking down the hallway she finds Olivia and instructs her "As soon as Nicolette returns I want to be informed."

"Yes your Grace. Do you wish for me to bring her to your quarters?"

"No I will come to hers. Make sure that the olive gown is pressed properly and I will take care of the jewels. Also take care that the Dowager does not see her until dinner."

"Of course your Grace."

Already deep in thought Vanessa continues to her quarters.

As Nicolette Josephine and Tristan enter the mansion Olivia intercepts them. "Miss Nicolette we must get you ready for dinner. Miss Josephine, Sir Tristan please go to your quarters, your mother has requested that everyone be ready to dine in an hour. Your grandmother is here and we must be punctual."

"We will see you soon Nicolette" says Tristan. Josephine waives as she follows her brother.

"Come Nina we must hurry there isn't much time. The maids are pressing your gown, you must take a bath and refresh yourself. There is no time to wash your hair, you are lucky it still looks as fresh as the day we washed it. We will have to put it up in a more contemporary style the Dowager will be expecting you to be in the latest fashions."

"Why is she here? Did she found out about me and came to check up on the family?"

"Oh I doubt this visit had anything to do with you Miss."

"Her maid told me that she has been rather concerned that the family has been missing the Duke so she has come to help lift their spirits."

"The Duchess was rather surprised by this visit. She is rather panicked I guess she is worried how the Dowager Duchess will take to you under the circumstances."

"Why do you say that, is there something wrong with me?"

"Oh no madam, but if I may be frank."

Nodding her head Nina says "Please."

"It is quite evident that you and the Douches have not been friends for long. The Duchess is a good woman one willing to help anyone. I believe that Kristine sees that and is angered that you are receiving such treatment. I see that there is more to this than just the kindness of her Grace. There is something about you which just draws people in. You are quite different from any woman that I have ever met blue blooded or not. I believe that the Duchess sees that, is drawn to it and wishes to help you because she knows that you are a good person in need of a friend. You could not have found a better ally or a friendlier family. Whatever it is that you are doing here Miss Nicolette I beseech you please do not hurt them."

Turning to Olivia Nina places her hands on the young womans shoulders, looks her in the eye and says "Olivia I have no intention of hurting anyone especially not any member of this family. I have seen

their kindness and the generosity of not just her Grace but everyone here. You are very perceptive to notice that I am very different from the women here, I am far more different than you can imagine. One day I hope that I can trust you enough to be able to confide in you, for now I need you to believe me and trust her Graces instincts. Can you do that for me? Can you trust your instincts and believe in what your heart is telling you?"

"Nina , I do believe you if I did not I would not have been so taken by you. I trust you and will defend you and assist you with whatever I can whenever I can. Her Grace has never been wrong, therefore, I have no reason to doubt your intentions. Now let us get you ready the Dowager Douches does not tolerate tardiness. We must be on our best behavior; she will scrutinize your every action as well as reaction. She is an extremely gracious woman though when it comes to her family she an admirable opponent and will protect them like a tigress."

"Well I am glad that I am in company of such strong women who have such spirit. I hope that she finds me suitable to befriend Vanessa."

"Oh I am sure that she will, if you were able to charm Madame Soleigh I am sure that you will have no problems with the Dowager."

Walking into her quarters Nicolette is taking off all the garments and she enters the warm bath which has been prepared and waiting for her.

Getting out of the tub her hair is brushed out and dried, styled in an interesting style that she would never think fitting of this era. As Olivia is putting the finishing touches on her quaff there is a knock at the door.

"You may enter" says Nicolette.

Opening the door Vanessa enters looking rather worried. "Hello my dear, how are you?"

"Considering all the surprises that we have had I would say I am well. Whatever brought on this visit?"

"I can only conclude that she was worried about the children and so she came to cheer us up."

Handing a bundle to Olivia she says "strategically place these in her hair and let us hope that the dowager does not recognize these as my jewels."

"Oh my goodness Vanessa they are beautiful are those diamonds and peridot?"

"Yes they are good eye; most people would never guess peridot."

"I cannot accept those they are too expensive."

"Do not worry my dear you will have some of your own shortly." Turning to Olivia she asks "is the dress pressed properly?"

"Yes madam it is hanging in the boudoir."

"Excellent let us see how it fits, Olivia would you please go and fetch it, I will finish twining the jewels in her hair."

Olivia brings the dress and skillfully buttons it up as Nicolette is mesmerized by her own reflection.

"I do not think that I will ever believe that it is me staring back from the mirror. Let us go before I get too full of myself." She laughs out loud and the two of them join her.

"The children are already downstairs entertaining their grandmother. She is highly interested in who you are, if we do not stray from the story that we agreed upon I do believe that she will not suspect anything is amiss." Wrapping Nicolette in a tight hug she whispers "Good luck my friend, this first test has come much sooner than we anticipated, none the less we must be strong."

"Olivia if you will" she nods to the door and Olivia rushes to open the French doors.

Ceremoniously they both walk out side by side and descend the staircase. Taking one last look at each other they share a sympathetic nervous smiles. Vanessa gives Nina 's hand one last encouraging squeeze and signals the footman to open the doors.

Vanessa walks in first with Nina a pace behind her; walking up to Viviane she begins her introduction. "Your Grace it is my great pleasure to introduce you

to my very dear friend Miss Nicolette Martin. Nicolette this is the Dowager Duchess of Crescentferd Viviane Wakefield."

Nicolette curtsies as deeply as she can without losing her balance. "Your Grace it is a pleasure to meet you."

"Oh the pleasure is all mine my dear, I simply had to come and meet the woman of whom my grandchildren sing such high praises."

"I am truly humbled by their acclaim."

"They seem to have taken to you so quickly. You have been here such a short time a week if my understanding is correct."

"Yes though I feel as is had known them all their lives. Vanessa would write to me about them. I just had to come and meet them."

"Were you at the wedding? I do not recall seeing you there."

"No I was not. By the time the invitation had reached me in the Americas it was only a week before the wedding, not enough time for me to come."

"Oh so you were in the Americas at the time? Pray tell what city?"

"New York"

"Ah yes I have heard of it. Though I have never had a chance to visit the New World myself I heard it is lovely is it not?"

"Yes it is but not as lovely as it is here. They call New York the city that never sleeps and that much is true.

"So you are a Yank then?"

"No I am not; my family originally came from a small country in the Mediterranean, more specifically Croatia. We moved to the Americas a week after I had met Vanessa. Our ship was departing from Paris so we came a few days early so that we could see the city as well as do some shopping. That is how I met Vanessa we just happen to be in the same ladies shop admiring the same hat. From that moment on we were inseparable and since then have kept in contact through letters."

Turning to Vanessa the douches inquires "Why have you never spoken of you friend?"

"Had I not your Grace? I must have mentioned her, perhaps in passing conversation."

"Hmm... Perhaps."

Turning back to Nina she continues "Vanessa was unaware of your visit or so she tells me."

Yes my visit was a surprise even to me. After I returned to Europe I very much wanted to come for a visit we spoke of it often in out letters but unfortunately my circumstances did not allow."

Her curiosity peaking at this sudden twist in the story she asks "What circumstances my dear?"

Looking at the children Nina responds "I do believe that story is better suited for mature ears."

Before the children are aware of the change in her tone Nina remembers "Josephine I have yet to finish the story of the Little Mermaid."

"That I believe is a much better story for this evening."

"What story is that my dear?"asks the Dowager Duchess.

"Josephine would you like to do the honors?"asks Nina .

"Oh yes, all right every one, this is what has happened in the story thus far...." Josephine proceeds to bring everyone to speed. She is very through she even attempts to sing the songs. Nina laughs to herself at the sheer determination of the girl and assists her by singing along.

That which should have only taken a half an hour turns into a 2 hour retelling of the story. Just as Nina and Josephine come to the end of 'A Part of your World' part I Vanessa realizes that it is quite past the children's bed time. Clapping she rises from her seat "That was wonderful oh I cannot wait to hear the rest tomorrow."

"Tomorrow oh no Mum we have finally gotten to the good past." She says turning to look at Nina .

"Yes it is the good part but by the looks of it, but the finally will just have to wait till morrow."

"You promise?"

"Yes I do my dear."

"All right then" taking her brother by the hand Tristan and Josephine give everyone a good night kiss and take their leave.

"They are such wonderful children, you really have raised them well" says Nina .

"I agree" says the Duchess.

"Now that the children have gone will you please explain your earlier statement?"

"Yes of course!" Nina begins her tale weaving it like a spider weaves its web, drawing in its pray until it is too late to turn back.

The Dowager listens intently hanging on to Nina 's every word. She smiles, frowns, gasps and practically cheers in all the right places. Knowing that the Dowager is buying their story Nina winks to Vanessa and they both smile knowing they have won one more person over to their side.

"My goodness you have been through quite an ordeal, oh you poor dear" the Dowager takes Nina into her embrace squeezing her tight.

"Do not worry we will help you" turning to Vanessa she says "Wont we?"

"Of course I have already told her that we will use all resources available to us to help her."

"I concur."

All three ladies make their way up the stairs to get ready for bed. As they pass Nina 's room she bids them goodnight. Continuing down the corridor the Duchess inquires "Well Vanessa if you are going to have her over for the season do you not think she would need an escort. We dare not have her be a laughing stock of London."

"Of course not!!" Vanessa says.

"Who have you asked?"Turning to Vanessa she stops and looks her in the eye. Vanessa turns her gaze to the floor. The dowager exclaims in hushed tones "Vanessa please tell me that you asked someone."

Returning her gaze to meet the Dowagers Vanessa responds with a pleading look "We were so busy trying to update her wardrobe and all her essentials, I forgot about an escort." Says Vanessa biting her lip.

At the realization of such an embarrassment befalling the poor girl the Dowager begins to pace the hallway. With one hand on her hip as the other grazes her forehead she asks "Do you know anyone who we could use on such a short notice?"

Answering her own question the Dowager continues "Well there is Steven but you know how fickle he has been about escorting anyone; he has become quite bored by the whole process. I do fear for him I do not know what he is searching for." The Dowager continues staring off into the distance continuing her monologue.

"I wish to see him happy but I do not know how to help him, he has gone through almost every eligible maiden in London." Still thinking about it internally she waives her hand as if to swat away the dreary thoughts. She turns towards Vanessa and smiles cheerfully thought it never quite reaches her eyes.

Vanessa quips "I could always ask Nicki , I am sure he would be willing to assist us."

"Oh what a splendid idea, he is still a bachelor moreover he is one of the most sought after

bachelors in all of Europe, if my memory serves me right. They world make a perfect match do you not think so Vanessa?"

Vanessa replies "Yes" though with not as much emphasis as the Dowager would like.

"You must summon him at once" reaching over she takes a piece of letterhead and quill placing them in her lap she continues to encourage her "you must write to him."

Vanessa sits herself at the drawing desk to compose her letter to Nicholas.

Dear Nicholas,

I hope that this letter finds you in good health and spirits. We are well and anxiously awaiting Declyn's return. My dear friend through a sudden turn

of events I am desperately in need of your assistance, with a rather delicate

matter, one I rather not discuss in this letter. In lieu of this I had hoped that you could join us early for the season. Hopefully your schedule permits, if your

answer is yes do not bother to send a response just come and give me the good news yourself.

Your ever faithful friend,

Vanessa

"Make sure to send this to multiple locations in case he has already come to London."

"I doubt that Nicki would come without paying us a visit" retorts Vanessa.

"Call for a messenger we shall get this out tonight." Rising from her chair Vanessa rings the bell summoning a footman.

Chapter 2

At Water's Edge - Chapter 5

Chapter 5

D,

As each day passes by I am more and more intrigued by these people and their lifestyle. It is beautiful how care free and simple their lives are. Yes I am aware that it is because they are well off but none the less with not as much to learn there is much more time to enjoy life. All those technological advances which are designed to make our lives "simpler" in the end make everything that much more complicated.

The air here is crisp and clean and everything is visually stunning. Yesterday I went out deep into the

wood beyond the meadow and I was shocked at how well preserved it was. Naturally I expected garbage to litter the ground and be strewn in the underbrush, so you can imagine my shock when I saw no such thing. It was an eye opener at what we (in the present) should behave like, unfortunately all that "progress" has caused us to digress in our respect for nature.

The wildlife is rather friendly, they did not fear me as you would think that they would. A gorgeous bird landed by me and I stood still just watching it and it watched me too. At that moment I burst into tears (why I don't know), I frightened it and naturally it flew away. I felt so lonely in that instant, though I am rarely alone I often feel empty and so lost. I put on a front for all, but I feel myself disappearing and it really scares me.

I think that Vanessa senses something is amiss because she keeps me so busy, that I don't have time to wallow in my own sorrow. Which when I think about it is good, but it's moments like this that I fear,

when all is still and quiet I have a feeling I can just dissipate, leave as quick as I came.

Yesterday I met a few more members of the family. It was quite nerve wrecking as I did not expect to be meeting them so soon. Tristan is a sweetheart, he is quite tall for his age and at the awkward brink between boyhood and adolescence. I thought he was at least a teenager, when Vanessa told me he is only ten I was shocked. He doesn't have his mothers coloring he's jet black hair has a tint of blue in the sun and his eyes are a steel blue gray which are perfectly off set by his pale complexion. He must take after his father who I have yet to meet.

With him came his grandmother the Dowager Duchess, a very intimidating woman who exudes strength and frailty, what a paradox. Her hair is a silver white and she has the same eyes as Tristan. She is the first person to hear the "story" Vanessa and I concocted and she has accepted me as warmly as everyone else. So I do believe it went well. In any case I need the practice as Vanessa is adamant that I have the ultimate experience while I am here. This

apparently entails me being introduced to all of her friends and their closely knit society as a whole. I have no idea what that involves but apparently it means dressing to the nine's and hob knobbing with the crème de la crème of London society. All I can say is Lord give me patience and strength to get through it with dignity.

Waking Nicky is determined to get an early start in her research 'unfortunately yesterday was a bust' she thinks to herself. 'Here we are again as a new day unfolds before me and I am determined to get to work. I know much needs to be done, I am anxious and nervous at what I will find when I am facing that which I nothing about.'

"I need to do this without so many distractions." She says as her stomach growls "I guess I will have to make a stop in the kitchens and fetch myself some breakfast. I hope Olivia is there I want someone to know my whereabouts in case I am needed."

She dresses herself in a simple gown, brushes her hair into a low ponytail and descends down the servant's stairs. Olivia is nowhere in sight she

decides she cannot wait for her any longer. The longer she stays the greater the chance of someone seeing her and delaying her mission for yet another day.

Sneaking out through the servants' door located in the back of the kitchen Nicky hikes up her skirts and breaks into a swift run; in hopes of quickly putting some distance between herself and the house. Her lungs struggle for air, as her heart pumps erratically she slows and decides to walk the rest of the way. 'It is a shame to run through such a beautiful place' she thinks to herself. Wanting not to get distracted again she is focused on reaching her goal, the cherry tree.

The closer she gets to the tree she notices a change in pressure. Walking around it very slowly she is listening for the buzzing noise "there, there it is" she slows down to a crawl trying to pinpoint the exact place where the frequency is strongest. Finding it she places her palms against the tree. She notices the vibrations seem to stem from the tree itself. Furthermore, she notes there is something rather unusual, there are no bugs, birds or any life forms

around the tree or in the tree itself. "How strange, it is as if they sense something is amiss."

She touches the tree poking and prodding. The hairs on her arm start to stand as her arm gets closer to a large hole in the base of the tree. There is an energy a static energy emitting from it. She peeks in but it is so dark she can barely see anything; it is as if light is swallowed up by it, almost like a miniature black hole. Scared to experiment with her own appendages she searches the ground for something to use. She finds a few pebbles grabs them and begins to toss into them into the hole. Listening for the sound of them landing at the base of the tree, she is intrigued when they do not.

'Well that is certainly interesting. Do black holes absorb sound as well? But it can't be a black hole if I came through it. It must be a portal or a worm hole; the rocks must be traveling back to 2009, or somewhere.'

Frustrated by her own lack of knowledge she hopes that someone came up with an inkling of the theory before Karl Schwarzchild. 'If not I will have to plant

the seed in some scientists head. Perhaps Vanessa will have some acquaintances in the scientific community.'

Seeing that it is almost noon she knows the family will be searching for her she decides to make her way back, but not before she tests again her theory of sound. Gathering her courage she steps up to the gap. As she approaches it she senses the change in pressure, sounds seem to diminish, in her ears there is a buzzing and a general feeling of a static energy is around her. The air crackles with it, with her head almost in the hole she yells into it as soon as sound escapes her lips it fades, swallowed up by the nothingness.

"Well it is a beginning" she says as she turns toward the house and starts her trip back.

Reaching the house she hears the children playing in the library, as she turns to enter the room she hears Olivia calling her.

"Miss, Miss the Dowager and Her Grace are in the sun room having their brunch and have requested that you join them. Have you broken your fast?"

"No, no I have not and I am famished. Would you be so kind to bring me a bit of something."

"Your usual Miss some fruit, cheese and a scone, we made blue berry ones?"

"That would be splendid. Were they looking for me?"

"Yes but I had told them that you had gone for an early walk. I saw you run out this morning."

"I looked for you in the kitchens, but there was no one there. I do not know where your quarters are, nor do I know your schedule, so I could not find you in order to tell you where I was going. I thought to wait for you but I did not want anyone to dissuade me from venturing out. If someone found me they would most likely manage to distract me."

A bell rings and Vanessa's head peaks out of the sun room "Olivia has Nicky returned yet? Oh there you are come in my dear." Vanessa disappears back into the room and Nicky walks in after her.

"Good day everyone" says Nicky curtsying before both duchesses.

Waiving her hand at Nicky the Dowager says "Oh there is no need for that, only formalities. Up, up... Go on and sit." Nicky rises and walks to the lounger by Vanessa.

"How did you sleep?"Inquires the Dowager. "How are your rooms? I do hope that they are adequate."

"Yes of course they are. Why do you ask?"

"Well you seem to be getting up quite early in the morn my dear; you will need to be getting plenty of beauty sleep. Soon the season will be upon you and sleep will not be so plentiful.

"Oh I did not realize."

"Well now you know, so stock up my dear you will surely be in need of it."

Nodding her head Nicky thinks to herself 'Well that will definitely put a damper on my plans.'

"I have splendid news Nicky, I received word that Madame Soleigh will be paying us a visit the day after morrow to deliver your first gown. Thankfully

she finished it with plenty of time for any alterations before the season opening gala."

"Oh well that is wonderful. I cannot wait to see what she has in store for me" she says with as much enthusiasm as she can muster at the bomb that Vanessa just dropped on her. "Pray tell when is this gala?"

"In a fortnight my dear. This leaves us plenty of time for you to get ready."

"Oh yes, I was scared that you were going to say much sooner."

"Do not think it is a long time Nicolette, it will come sooner than you think. There is much to do before you are ready. Thankfully we took care of most of the worry some issues. Now if we could just get an answer from Monsieur Devereux." the Dowager adds.

"Viviane!!!" Vanessa says in a stern tone through her clenched teeth giving the Dowager a look that would silence anyone but the Dowager apparently.

Realizing the slip of her tongue Dowager continues "Well she should know."

"Should know what?"

Vanessa squirms uncomfortably. "Well you cannot go alone my dear, we have been trying to get you an escort. I have the perfect person, a friend of mine Nicki I have known him for ages, actually almost as long as I have known you. His sister wanted him to be my escort when I had my coming out. He is dashing and charming and quite single." She says with a wink.

Jumping in the Dowagers quips "He is one of the most sought after bachelors in all of Europe."

Rolling her eyes Vanessa continues "I have asked him to come early for the season so that you may be acquainted with him prior to the gala, but I have yet to hear from him."

"Well my dear it has only been a few hours. I have full confidence he will come running at your beckon. You see my dear he quite fancied Vanessa, before she was married to Declyn. He gave my son quite a run

for his money. I do not think that he ever really got over losing her."

Blushing Vanessa retorts shyly "Really Viviane, the stories you come up with."

Sensing there is more to the story Nicky asks "so what happened?"

"Oh nothing." Says Vanessa waiving her hand signaling the insignificance of the situation.

"Nothing, Oh no my dear, you see Nicolette she broke his poor heart when she choose Decklyn. Anyone who saw Declyn and Vanessa together would have known they were meant to be. Except poor Nicholas, he desperately held out hope until her wedding when she finally said I do."

"Aww... I do feel for him then."

"Oh no need for pity my dear, Nicki is like a cat he always falls on his feet. I'm sure he found comfort and solace in someone's arms that night and thereafter." adds Vanessa with a giggle.

Shocked that they just branded him a womanizer with their tales of his exploits Nicky asks "Is it proper for me to be seen with such a man if the tales of his pilandering ways are so well known?"

Vanessa shakes her head "It is different here my dear. Though he has been seen with his share of women, he has been a gentleman to all. He has followed society's etiquette in such matters therefore, he is still found to be a perfect gentleman and hence still hunted as a match."

"Well I guess we shall see."

"Hmm.... Yes." says the Dowager deep in thought.

"I was hoping to spend some time with the children but I am quite tired. I do believe I will go and take a nap before supper, perhaps those early mornings are finally catching up with me."

"Of course my dear off you go and if you are not up in time for dinner do not worry we will not wake you."

"Oh please do, if I sleep too long I will not be able to get a proper rest tonight."

"As you wish my dear." replies the Dowager.

Nicky exits the room and walks up the grand staircase to her chamber getting more tired by the second. As she reaches her room she closes the door and draws the curtains. She sits on the bed to remove her shoes as she does she collapses upon the cloud of pillows and slips into a deep slumber.

"Momma I want to see if Nicky is awake, may I go and fetch her?"

"All right, but if she is not well enough to come down do not be too insistent."

"I won't be." she says running up the stairs as fast as her little feet can carry her.

Quietly she knocks, there is no response, so she quietly opens the door and sticks her head in. The room is pitch black and she hears Nicky's deep breathing.

"Nicky, Nicky are you awake?"

There is no answer so she climbs into bed next to her. The movement does not even faze the sleeping

beauty. So Josephine calls out her name, as she gently shakes her shoulder.

"Nicky, Nicky it is time for supper, wont you come down we miss you."

Nicolette is slightly jarred from her deep slumber. "Josephine is that you? Oh I did not realize how tired I really was."

Sitting up she gathers the little girl to her side for a big hug.

"How have you been today?"

"Good, I missed you. I was forced to play with Tristan since you did not come for our lessons."

"I am so sorry, I promise tomorrow we will start fresh and Tristan can join us if he wishes."

Scrunching her face at thought of having to share she retorts "Must he?"

"Well love who you will practice with if not with Tristan. Just think of it this way it can be your secret language which no one else can understand."

"Well if you put it that way, I guess he can. Mother said that I should come and wake you. We are about to dine. You must be famished, Olivia said that you never broke your fast this morning."

"Oh my goodness I forgot, I was so tired I lost all feeling of hunger. Well let us go, we do not wish to keep them waiting." Taking Josephine by the hand they both jump off the bed. Josephine pulls at the curtains letting the afternoon light in. Passing by the mirror Nicky fusses with her hair until she finally gives up and simply brushes it out and twists it into a tight bun.

Hand in hand they run down the stairs giggling, they simultaneously enter the dining room and take their places.

"It appears that the nap did you much good Nicolette." Says the Dowager.

"Yes it seems that it did. I just hope I can still get a good night's rest tonight."

"I am sure you will. We have been keeping you rather busy since you have come to us. Your trip was rather

arduous and perhaps your lack of rest has finaly caught up with you."

"It is possible."

The serving staff enters the room and they begin serving all of the fine dishes. Everyone participates in the conversation. The atmosphere is light and the evening passes quickly. After two glasses of wine Nicolette is ready for bed yet again.

Out of the corner of her eye Vanessa sees her slowly dozing off. Noticing this Vanessa decides to bring the evening to a close.

She announces "I do think it is time for all of us to retire for the night, tomorrow will be a long day."

Relieved Nicky stands up and wishes everyone a good night and excuses herself.

"Poor child she looks worse for wear, that nap did very little for her, she seems more tired now than she was this afternoon." says the Dowager in a concerned tone.

Vanessa laughs "well I think the wine helped as well. She told me that of all the spirits wine makes her the sleepiest."

"Ahh yes she did have two glasses did she not. Well for her sake lets pray it is just that, there is no time for her to fall ill with the season just around the bend."

"I will call on Dr. Whittleton to come and check on her just to be sure."

"Excellent idea which can wait till morrow. Goodnight my loves I shall see you all tomorrow bright and early." With gentle kisses to all the dowager takes her leave.

As soft light filters through the slit in the curtain Nicky stirs.

"Mmmmmmmmm..... Now that is what I call a good night's rest."

She slides out of bed and looks at her watch, 'excellent I have time for a bath before breakfast.'

While she is lounging in the lovely that is the warm bath Olivia readied for her she is contemplating whether or not to ask, but her curiosity gets the better of her "Livy have you ever met Monsieur Devereux?"

"Oh yes I have, he is devastatingly handsome he comes for a visit whenever he is in London. All the maids make some excuse to cross his path. Not only is he dashing but he is kind and very sweet. You should see him with the children, it is as if they were his own. Truth be told from what I have heard he wishes they were."

Clasping her hand over her mouth she mumbles "I should not have said that. I do apologize for overstepping my bounds."

Laughing out loud Nicky says "oh do not worry Livy, the Dowager said much worse last night."

"Is the Earl coming for a visit?"

"Better, Vanessa has gotten her sights on him escorting me to the gala."

"Oh you are so lucky Miss; they will all be green with envy. How I wish I could be there to see it all."

"Well I do believe you will have a front row seat to all the shenanigans Vanessa has planned."

Donning a freshly pressed gown Nicky readies herself and leaves the room to join the others for breakfast.

Nicky enters the room and sees everyone one is busy chattering away that they do not notice her walking in. As she is about to greet everyone she notes that there is a sixth place setting, looking to the end of the room she sees a man talking to Vanessa. 'Could that be Declyn? Oh he looks much too old, and looks nothing like Tristan. He more fitting to be the Dowagers husband than Vanessa's. Oh God I hope he isn't Mr. Devereux!!'

"Nicky!!!" yells out Josephine as she lunges herself at Nicky. This brings everyone's attentions to her and she blushes.

The gentleman begins to walk towards her and retorts to Vanessa "Well at least she has gotten her

color back; you have been quite successful at rehabilitating our patient."

Walking up to her the stranger bows, extends his hand and says "Miss. Martin it is good to see you out of bed and about."

Unsure of what her response should be she says "Thank you Sir...?"

"Oh where are my manners, I am Dr. Nathaniel Whittleton it is a pleasure."

"Thank you Doctor. Thank you for taking such good care of me in my hour of need."

"It was no trouble my dear, I am always at the family's disposal and now at yours as well. I have to apologize to you Miss. Martin I have been neglecting you as a patient. That is why I decided to come and pay you a visit to see how you are fairing. Perhaps after breakfast I can examine you, in order to give you a clean bill of health, so that you can have your mind at ease during the season."

"I suppose that would be wise."

Everyone takes their seats and begin their meal.

"Nicky, will we begin our lessons today?"Asks Tristan.

"Yes we will, right after the Doctor examines me. I will come and fetch you once I am done."

The rest of the meal is rather uneventful, as it comes to a close the Doctors stands and comes to Nicky's side. She rises from her chair and he gallantly pulls it out for her and gives her his arm.

"Vanessa we will use the study if that is alright with you."

"You can use whatever facilities you need Nathaniel, I will make sure you are not disrupted."

With that the good Doctor and Nicky take their leave. As they enter the library Nicky settles herself on the loveseat and the doctor follows suit by picking the chair directly opposite of her.

"So tell me Nicolette how are you feeling? The last time I saw you, you were still not conscious. It was not a coma just a very deep sleep, that is why I was not so worried when I left you. I unfortunately had a

family emergency which needed tending to. I gave Vanessa several names of colleagues who could take my place during my absence, through it appears that Vanessa did not call on any of them. So I am under the impression that you have made a full recovery."

"I have no recollection of anything that happened from the time I fainted to waking in the room. It does scare me a bit. Though I am feeling as well as I ever remember feeling."

"You do not have any memory lapses, blackouts; trouble waking up; trouble sleeping or unexplained fatigue?"

"Other than the blackout I mentioned to you previously I do not. I have been feeling very tired lately, perhaps I have been taking on a lot without consideration of my previous condition."

"Hmmm... yes perhaps. Well then let us begin your physical that way we can rule out anything that might be of concern."

"Very well."

The Doctor begins his examination and everything seems to be in order.

"Well everything looks good Nicolette; you are a picture of good health. Vanessa will be relieved as you are I am sure. Are there any other concerns that you have? Any questions that I can answer for you?" says the Doctor as he puts his stethoscope and other medical paraphernalia into his bag.

"No thank you, your diagnosis has laid my worries to rest." Responds Nicky standing up getting ready to leave.

"Well I do have some questions for you, that is if you do not mind." He says settling back into his chair.

Shocked Nicky walks toward the window, trying to hide her face from the Doctor.

"What do you wish to know?" 'Please let it be something trivial, don't ask me that which I can't answer, not truthfully anyway.'

"You can start by telling me when you are from?"

Shocked Nicky turns "You mean where?" her voice an octave higher than she would like.

Seeing her discomfort Nate gets up and walks to the bar to fix himself a drink. With a smirk he replies "no my dear, I know where I do think that is the only truthful thing you told the Dowager. I wish to know when?"

Walking over to her he continues "you have to remember I was one of the first people other than Vanessa and the children to see you. What you were wearing, the peculiar items you carried with you, they did not come from this time, this century even. Vanessa wrote to me of the year is it true?"

"What wonders the world must hold in your era. Sit my dear" he says as he guides her to the nearest chair.

"Tell me what medical marvels there are? What cure, methods, what is the world like? He stops throwing, questions at her just as he bursts into a laugh. "I must seem like a child in a sweet shop. You must forgive me."

Nodding her head she sheepishly responds "Yes it is overwhelming."

Realizing that she has no choice she says "if I'm going to answer this barrage of questions, I am going to need a stiff drink first."

Once again his booming laugh fills the room this time bringing a smile to Nick's face.

"Choose your poison Nicolette." She walks up to the bar and after some contemplation chooses the after dinner brandy. Sitting back down she begins "In two thousand and nine women are quite educated. My specialization is not in medicine, though the sciences were always a great passion of mine, hence, I do know my fair share."

She continues answering his questions of various cures, (penicillin); new diseases (cancer, AIDS) or rather old ones which now have a name.

After what seems like ages there is a soft knock at the door.

"You may enter" says Nathaniel. As the door opens Josephine enters "pardon me Sir".

"Come in, come in my dear."

"Doctor we have been waiting for some time now to find out if Nicky is well enough to attend the ball."

"Yes she is, we have just been so preoccupied chatting away. I will not keep your guest any longer you may go on to your lessons."

"Actually Doctor I have a question for you."

Turning to Josephine she says "Love fetch your brother and meet me by the roses, I will be there shortly. Make sure to ease everyone else's minds by telling them the Doctor has given me a clean bill of health. I dare say that they will be relieved."

As Josephine leaves and shuts the door behind her Nicky turns to the Doctor "Now that you know, I need your help. I desperately wish to find a way home. I think I know how but I need someone who might have more knowledge of the general field, even though it all might be theoretical."

"What is it that you need?"

"Do you have any friends who are physicists, eccentrically inclined, ones that I can trust with this secret and that might be able to assist me."

"You wish to go home? To your own time? But how is that possible?"

"I believe I can return the way I came. This is all theoretical of course but if it happened once, I do not see why it could not happen again. The anomaly which brought me here, I believe it has returned. I do not know if it will take me to the same time and place but I feel the need to try. I owe it to my family to at least make an attempt."

"I will try to find someone, though I have never heard of such a thing."

"Well truthfully no one in my time would believe it either. Time travel is just a theory no one has successfully established a model or has any proof of it."

"Do you know how you got here? You said you had a theory I would very much like to hear it."

Sitting back down she continues "Think of time as a circular not linear, the present, past and future are all taking place at the same time. It is possible that some cosmic anomaly occurred creating a bridge between the two periods. This bridge we would call a worm hole, it is possible that the light which I walked into was the doorway."

To illustrate her theory Nicky draws a diagram for the Doctor.

"Well it is rather farfetched my dear but it does sound possible, you are here after all. I will contact some colleagues and see who would be of outmost assistance to you."

With that they both stand and head for the door. Opening the door the Doctor continues "Thank you for your candor Nicolette, I look forward to conversing with you again. Till tonight then."

"Likewise Nathaniel it truly was a pleasure, it is nice not having to pretend with everyone."

Walking out she sees out of the corner of her eye a ruffle of skirts, hurriedly rounding the corner.

Curious she follows only to find Kristine pressed up against the alcove holding the fresh wash. Angry that she was eavesdropping again she decides to confront her.

"Kristine come out here" she does not budge, "Kristine, that is your name, isn't it? Come out this instant!"

Taking her sweet time she walks out, the wash is straddling one hip and her hand perched on the other.

She turns her contemptuous face toward Nicky and spits out "Ye aren't the boss of me. They may all be blinded by you but I see you for what you are. What is it that you are pretending to be ey....? Waiting to get your hands on the Earl of perhaps the Count, slithering up the social ladder like a snake, y'are."

Shocked and taken back by the brazen way she spoke to her Nicky retorts "You will not speak to me in such a matter do you understand. First I do not deserve it and second I am not beneath you. You should be thankful that I have not uttered a word of this

appalling behavior to Vanessa. I have tried to be kind and patient but this outright attach is the last straw."

For a split second scarred for her job Kristine considers apologizing. The softening of her crude features sets Nicky back. Simultaneously she rethinks her threat to the scullery maid.

"If you apologize and promise not to do any of this again I may be swayed to forget this ever happened."

Walking away Nicky is determined to have the last word, she turns and coldly declares "You have until tonight to formally apologize to me. I would actually prefer you not concede, that way I can get you out of my hair for good."

With that she turns and walks away leaving Kristine staring behind her mouth agape in disbelief.

Walking into the sunshine she pauses to let it wash over her with its warmth. The exchange with Kristine left her angry, shaking from frustration. 'I've never been good at confrontations, but I have to say that felt good. I did not realize I was holding so much back.' She thinks to herself.

Spotting the children sitting on a bench by the rose garden she walks out to meet them. Sensing her approach both of the children turn, Josephine stands to run to her when Tristan stops her.

Struggling against his hold on her she stumbles and falls to the ground.

"Tristan let her go." She says.

"Let me go." Yells Josephine.

"Josephine you must learn to control yourself, it is just a bit too much." He says to justify his action.

Bending to the poor girl Nicky helps her up and dust her off.

"Tristan that was uncalled for."

"But she..."

Raising her hand she cuts him off "Josephine you cannot run to me every time you see me. You must learn to compose yourself, you are a big girl now and you must begin to act accordingly. Tristan I do believe you need to apologize to your sister for manhandling her."

With his head bowed he says "Josephine I am sorry for what I did, I hope you were not injured."

"Thank you, I am all right, and I promise to try to be better."

Taking each by hand they walk toward the lake. "Before we begin the lessons I would like to know what you would like to learn? Is there any area that you are interested in that I can shed some light on? Your other tutors can cover the basics of what you need to know. I was planning to teach you Croatian and share with you the hodgepodge of assorted knowledge that I have collected over the years."

"We know that you are different and mother said that we cannot discuss it, for the fear that others might find out. Can you tell us more about where you are from? Can you teach me how to use the picture taker? It is fascinating."

"Well that sounds like a fine idea." Sitting on a log by the shore of the lake she begins her story. The children pay very close attention and ask a plethora of questions which she gladly answers.

"My goodness look at the time, we should be heading back dinner will be served shortly. I was hoping to continue our after dinner theater tonight. Would you like to participate Tristan?"

"Yes I would, which part will I play, Prince Eric?" he says hopefully.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha..." Josephine bursts into a fit of laughter. Poor Tristan turning several shades of scarlet, bows his head.

"That is not very nice Josephine, prestani (stop) do not make fun of your brother."

Turning her attentions to the embarrassed boy she continues "If you were a decade older you would make a fine Eric, for now how about the role of Scuttle? He is a fun character; it is because of him that I love birds."

Brightening he agrees. On the walk back Nicky plans out the production of the story, so that they can act it out along with her.

Walking into her room she strips off her dress and gets ready.

"Nicolette this is your last dress, tomorrow you will finaly see the rest. Are you excited about Madame Soleigh's visit? I cannot wait for her to unveil your gowns. I wager you will look stunning, and be the bell of the ball."

"Oh that is right, it completely slipped my mind that she will be coming. I cannot wait either."

Dressed and ready she turns to Olivia for a final inspection "You look stunning; the green muslin really brings out the green in your eyes and the red in your hair." observes the maid.

"Awww.. Thank you my Livy." With that she closes the door behind her and descending the stairs.

She enters the dining room and is embarrassed by the attention she receives.

"My dear you look stunning, if I was only two decades younger" says Nathaniel bowing before her.

Giving him her hand he escorts her to her seat.

"I concur you look spectacular, Madame Soleigh's creations do suit you."

As the dinner is brought to a close Nicolette suggests they all enter the library so they may enjoy the play the children wish to perform.

"Oh yes we were left in suspense, whatever shall happen next? Tristan will you be joining them?"

"Yes mother, I will be playing the role of Scuttle."

"Let us then retire to the library." Turning to the butler Vanessa says "no interruptions please."

Everyone settles in and Josephine brings them all to speed, much quicker this time. Nicky starts with the scene in the grotto, just as Ariel sees the fireworks for the celebration of Eric's Birthday. Coming up to the part in the story when the ship explodes the door to the library bursts open. Everyone is startled as a man walks in with determination, the butler at his heals. "Madame I tried to stop him but he refused to leave."

Walking up to Vanessa he says "I came as soon as I read it" he holds up the note "is everything all right?"

Looking around the intruder she says to the butler "thank you, you may leave us".

She turns to all "I believe you know almost everyone here Nicki." He nods, his eyes settling on Nicky holding a pillow to her chest. As she sees his eyes on her she drops it, which draws a smirk to his lips. Just as he is about to ask who the ravishing beauty is Josephine rushes to him "Uncle Nicki!"

Picking her up he declares "My you have grown, how old are you now ten?"

Swatting at his shoulder she says "You are silly you know I am only six."

"Oh you are aren't you" he says tickling her as he sets her down.

She squirms out of his grasp and runs to Nicky.

"Nicky, wouldn't Nicki make a splendid Eric?" she says not so innocently.

'She is as bad as her mother; I can just see the cogs working away in that sweet little head of hers. Vanessa must be proud.'

"Yes Monsieur Deverough would make a spectacular Eric, but I am sure that he is tired for his journey and would prefer to be a spectator not a participant."

"Nicki won't you please?" she runs back to him, looking up at him with her puppy dog eyes she begs "Say you will."

Sensing this might be worth partaking in he looks Nicky directly in the eye and without hesitation says "Yes of course, anything for you my dear."

Pulling him across the room towards Nicolette, Josephine informs him "You will be Prince Eric and you are in love with Ariel who is a mermaid, she saves you."

Bowing before Nicolette he introduces himself "I do not believe I have had the pleasure of your acquaintance Mademoiselle."

Curtsying she responds "It is a pleasure."

"Yes it is" he says eyeing her at this much closer proximity "but I still do not know your name."

"Nicholas must you be so difficult" the Dowager rolls her eyes at him "This is Miss Nicolette Martin, Vanessa's friend for the Americas. She will be staying with us for the season."

Turning back to Nicolette he asks "So this Prince I am to play, what is it that you need me to do?"

"Not very much if you would be so kind to lay on the floor." As he does his eyes never leave her.

'His gaze is unsettling, 'I'm going to have trouble with this one.'

So she attempts not to look directly at his eyes instead she focuses on his lips.

'Bad move! Better yet how about his ear.'

Softly she whispers into it "Close your eyes pretend that you are unconscious. I will sing to you when you hear me say 'What would I give to live where you are?' Begin to come too and slowly begin to open your eyes. When I sing 'What would I pay to stay here beside you?, ' cup my hand to your face. And lastly when you hear, 'What would I do to see you smiling at me?' smile. Then Grimsby will call out for

you, he will come to you, I will swim away and the scene will come to a close. "

Nicki closes his eyes and nods.

Returning to their original positions, the show goes on. Nicki is laying on the beach, Tristan listens to the "heart beat" in his foot; Nicki breaths and Nicolette begins to sing.

Coming to the most crucial part Nicki follows her directions flawlessly.

Holding her hand to his cheek he looks straight into her eyes, she feels a familiar warmth wash over her, almost making her forget the words.

'This one is definitely going to be trouble.'

Grimsby comes and leads Eric away from the shore and she sings the last refrain

"I don't know when, I don't know how, But I know something's starting right now..., Watch and you'll see, Someday I'll be, Part of your" two pot covers are crashed together by Livy, the children pull up a white sheet behind her simulating the wave as the song

comes to its pinnacle. Nicolette arches her back and pushes herself up over the side of the lounger as she sings the last word "world."

Their audience applauds wildly and they all take a bow. Even Nicki comes and joins them, with Josephine's encouragement of course.

He takes Nicolettes hand and gives it a squeeze. The children run to the Dowager and Vanessa and the two of them are left standing there alone still holding hands. Nicolette looks up at him and lets go, he continues to hold on but finally let's go when Josephine runs to them. Nicolette picks her up, and the devious little thing hugs them both bringing them close. So close that Nicky can feel his body heat radiating towards her, making her blush as her thoughts drift off.

'Well can you blame me they just don't make them this way anymore. But this one is off limits, keep your thoughts focused.'

Out of the chaos Vanessa's voice brings the spotlight back to the matter at hand.

"It is getting late my loves t'is time for you to go to bed." Looking at Nicki she says "And it is time to discuss the matter at hand."

As the children filter out of the room along with the staff only the adults are left.

"Nicki thank you for coming on such a short notice."

"What is the reason for this?" Nicki asks holding up the letter.

"Nicki, sit I wish to explain."

Shocked Nicolette speaks up.

"He does not know? You did not tell him why he is here? Vanessa, how could you." She says with embarrassment and disbelief.

Stepping up to Nicki she takes the letter out of his hand and reads it. Turning she hands him the letter and says "I am utterly embarrassed and I apologize for all of this. I hope you have a pleasant trip back and enjoy the season on your own terms."

Turning to Vanessa she continues "Because I refuse to participate in such deceitful practices. I will not

have him here only because of some misguided use of his affections for you."

With a huff she picks up her skirts and purposefully walks to the door standing on the threshold she adds "That is just wrong, and you know it."

Slamming it with all her might she leans against it, as she recovers she pushes herself off. Initially she planned to go directly to her room, but she is too worked up to sleep, instead she walks out on to the terrace overlooking the grounds.

As she walks out she sees just how bright it is. Seeing the full moon she continues walking until she is standing directly in it the beam of light.

With her face upturned to the glorious moon she raises her hands as if in prayer:

"My mother is Venus,

My father is Mars,

The Moon is my brother,

And my sisters are the Stars."

She smiles to herself and begins to sing:

"I see the moon and the moon sees me.

The moon sees the somebody I'd like to see.

God Bless the moon and God bless me,

God bless the somebody I'd like to see."

She continues to add her own lyrics to the nursery rhyme, as she begins to sway, not realizing that she is being watched.

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Chapter 3

At Water's Edge - Chapter 6

Chapter 6

After his discussion with Vanessa, Nicki was rather vexed that she brought him there under false pretences. As Nicolette stated she had used his affections to do her bidding. Yet he knew that Nessa would never have done such a thing unless she was in absolute need of him. So he listened to her explanation, once her pleading was over he was determined to leave. That is until he saw through the window the girl walking in the moonlight. Fascinated by the sight he reluctantly agrees to think it over and give his final answer to Vanessa in the morning.

Now he is standing hidden in the shadow of the gazebo, observing her sing and dance like no one is watching. She is an intriguing creature, perhaps she would make this season worthwhile partaking in. God only knows his mother would be pleased, she has not stopped hounding him for grandchildren.

Thought he is still not sure if that scene in the library was truthful or staged just to keep him engaged, to make him stay. It may be that she wished to make herself a victim so that they would have a common bond. But she looked utterly horrified, and she stormed out with such conviction. Who knows when it comes to the emotions of women, they are fickle foes. None the less it might be worthwhile to stay just to see how it all unfolds.

"She is delightful to watch" with that though he walks forward for a closer look, and makes the error of stepping on a branch - crack.

Nicolette stops, frozen "Is someone there?"

Damning himself for making the unwitting mistake, Nicki announces himself,

"Do not let me interrupt you Priestess."

'It's him, go figure; oh I must have made a complete fool of myself.'

Without missing a beat she quips over her shoulder "Have you enjoyed the view then? I would have thought that a true gentleman would have made his presence known."

"To interrupt your prayer to the moon and deny myself the pleasure of watching you dance in such an uninhibited manner, NEVER!!" he responds with a sexy crooked grin.

"Tell me Monsieur Devereux does such brazen adulation work on your usual victims?"

"Do not flatter yourself Mademoiselle, what I was stating was mere fact, if I was attempting to seduce you I would have made my intentions quite clear."

With a coy smile upon her lips she turns toward him and retorts

"Really, thank goodness, I can truly say that I am relieved."

"You are?" He says with a confused look on his face. "Pray tell, why is that?"

"Ahh... that is for me to know and for you to find out Monsieur. A lady must have some secrets."

With a nod of his head he concedes "Please call me Nicholas, better yet Nicki. After all that has happened I do believe we should be on friendlier terms."

"Very well Nicholas, you may call me Nicolette or Nina if you prefer. Am I to assume that you have decided to stay for the season?"

"Yes I have, though I wish not to tell Vanessa just yet. Let her conscience plague her for one night." He ends with a wink.

"Now if you shall be so kind, please allow me to escort you back to the mansion. It is unseemly for a young woman to be out at this time of night, with a man devoid of a chaperone."

"How kind of you to be so concerned for my reputation." With that she places her hand upon the crook of his extended arm and they wordlessly walk back to the manor.

Just before entering the manor she sneaks a look at Nicki, his chiseled features alight by the rays of the moon.

Seeing her watch him out of the corner of his eye, he straightens and smiles ever so slightly. Stepping over the threshold she turns and looking up at him through her lashes whispers "Thank you."

Midway up the staircase she turns "By staying for the season am I to assume that you have agreed to be my escort?"

Surprised by her bluntness he retorts "That I have not decided as of yet. Perhaps I will, would that please you?"

Contemplating the fact she answers "Let us cross that bridge when we come to it. Goodnight Nicki."

Bowing to her he bids her a good night.

Dear D,

Well it is safe to say that I have had a rather exciting day. I could not wait till tomorrow to write this so here I am. For one I have met the family physician

who will be my liaison to discovering a way home. I am hoping that he will find someone to assist me, the sooner the better.

And then there is Monsieur Nicholas Devereux can we say WOW!!! If I ever doubted it I can safely say with conviction that I was soooo... born in the wrong century. Eye candy is a term that does not even begin to describe him. McSteamy and McDreamy got nothing on him.

I should have been livid with him when he just stood there watching me. Don't get me wrong I was, but then I turned to look at him; leaning there against the gazebo he walked out and stood before me bathed in the moonlight, every feature accentuated, from his nonchalant posture, to his effortless gait. My God he was like a Greek god brought to life before me. He was/is everything you could possibly want in a man; tall; broad shouldered; fair sun kissed hair; aqua green eyes brimming with cockiness' and a smile full of confidence bordering on arrogance. I didn't know whether to kiss him or slap him. Given all the

provoking he did, I really just wanted to slap him and then kiss the boo boo's away.

Now let's be serious it would be a grave mistake to start anything with anyone while I'm here. It would cause unnecessary heartache for all parties involved, when I eventually left. So we can play, flirt and tease, as long as there is no emotionally involvement I think it is safe. Because I 'm no angel and I need something or someone to... well...occupy my time while I am here and he is definitely just what the doctor ordered.

Ok now I am off to sleep, I can't wait to dream.

Till morrow!!!

Just as she is about to snuggle into bed for a sweet night's dream there is an unexpected knock at the door.

'Who ever could that be? Maybe it's Nicki. Oh you are horrible; get your mind out of the gutter.'

The knocking is getting more persistent, "Hold your horses I'm coming."

Nina gets up, wraps herself in a dressing robe; checks herself in the mirror running her fingers through her hair just in case.

Opening the door she sees Kristine standing before her with a pained look on her face.

"Yes?"

"I have come here to apologize for my actions earlier today. I hope that you can forgive me and we can have a fresh start."

"Well I can honestly say that I am shocked that you came. I will accept your apology only because I do not want to be the cause of you losing your position here. Though I pray that you will heed this as a warning and change your ways."

"Yes madam, you are most magnanimous."

With that she turns and leaves. Watching her walk away Nina thinks to herself 'Let's see how long this lasts. I trust her only as far as I could throw her.'

Nina closes the door and snuggles back into bed.

Waking Nina gets ready, dons her last gown and hurries down the stairs with a surprising spring in her step.

"Good morning everyone!" she says to all as she walks into the dining room.

Vanessa rushes over to her and embraces her. Holding on to her a tad bit longer than usual, she whispers into her ear.

"Please forgive me, I only meant the best. Do not worry I explained everything to him; he knows you had no knowledge of this. Please do not be angry. Say that you forgive me."

The last words stuck in her throat as he eyes brim over with tears.

Squeezing her tighter Nina whispers "Of course I forgive you, I know you only had my best intentions in mind."

Holding her out at arms length she looks into Vanessa's eyes and continues "I need to apologize for overreacting, it was unfair to you after all that you have done for me. I hope that you can forgive me."

Overwhelmed with emotion Vanessa just nods as the tears pour down her face.

They hug one last time, Nina wipes away Vanessa's tears and Vanessa laughs at the silliness of it all as they walk to the table to take their places.

Noticing that Nicki is not present Nina inquires of his ware bouts.

"Is Nicki going to join us?"

"Nicki will come down when he is ready, I do believe he is still upset with me."

"Oh I am sure he will forgive you just as quickly as I have."

"From your lips to Gods ears Nicolette. I would hate to think that of all things, this ruins our friendship."

As the words slip from her lips the door to the dining room opens and the butler walks in announcing that Madame Soleigh has arrived.

"She is a bit early, please have her set up in the drawing room, we will be joining her shortly."

"Yes your Grace." He replies bowing out of the room.

"Well I am done, I do not think I could eat another morsel I am giddy with excitement."

"As am I, I cannot wait to see you in them."

With that all the ladies leave the room and make their way down the hall to the drawing room.

"Nicolette mon cherie, I have quite a few treats for you today!"

"Evangeline, I cannot wait any longer the anticipation is killing me. Let me see!!!"

"Go and strip my dear, if I can say so I do believe I have out done myself this time."

As Nina is trying on the first creation, there is a knock at the door, Vanessa opens it and finds Nicki standing in the doorway.

"May I speak to..." just as he is about to finish his sentence Nina walks out in a lavender design. All turn to admire her as does Nicki, he takes a step closer completely memorized by her. Vanessa looks from Nina to Nicki and smiles.

"Nicki you were saying? What is it that you wish to discuss with me?"

"Oh it is beautiful Evangeline" Nicolette says kissing the seamstress on the cheek. As she does she sees Nicki standing in the doorway staring at her.

"I do believe that this one is perfect, it has even left poor Monsieur Devereux speechless." Evangeline replies with a giggle.

With that comment Nicki snaps out of his state and turns to Vanessa "I wish to speak to you, privately."

As he closes the door behind them, he looks at Nina one last time.

"Cheri you have that boy wrapped around your little finger, he is not going anywhere. You should reject him until he is begging you to allow him to escort you. Thinking he can pick and choose make you lay awake and wonder what his decision will be. Just you wait until he sees you in the other creation I have made for you. He will drag you to the nearest altar when he sees you in it, oui."

"They are all so beautiful but I do not think there will be any wedding bells tolling for me anytime soon."

Closing the door behind her Vanessa follows Nicki into the library. With his back to her he declares,

"I have made my decision."

"I do hope that it is favorable?"

"I have decided that it would be rather unfair that the poor girl suffer in lieu of your ill made decision. Therefore, I will gladly escort her to whichever functions she wishes to attend. Though I must warn you any additional plotting will bring on rather unpleasant consequences. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes perfectly. Nicki please say that you forgive me. Please..." Vanessa begins to weep.

Throughout his speech Nicki's face was hard as stone, but at the sight of the pain that he has caused her by being so cold and aloof, his façade crumbles and he pulls her into his embrace.

"I am so sorry, please forgive me...." she pleads turning her face up to his and he reaches to wipe her tears away.

At that moment the doors to the library are flung open as Declyn walks in with a smile on his face. A smile which quickly fades into a grimace, as he finds his wife in the arms of another man.

"Devereux get your hands off my wife!!"

Nicki and Vanessa jump away from one another. Vanessa rushes to Declyn's side and is attempting to guide him out of the room.

"My love, what a surprise I am so glad that you have returned. The children will be so happy to have you home. There is much I must tell you."

"I am sure there is, but I am not done with Devereux." walking further into the room he stops only when he is toe to toe with Nicholas.

"Wakefield whatever you think happened did not."Nicholas attempts to defuse the heated situation.

"Whatever happened or did not I am not concerned with. What I do know is do not want you now or ever in the vicinity of my wife or my family. Did you enjoy playing house while I have been gone? Did you think that you could take my place? Will you ever learn Deveroux?"

He pushes Nicholas and keeps pushing him until he knocks him into the writing table. With his hand clenched into a fist he continued "Perhaps I can make you learn once and for all."

Still in the drawing room Nina hears all the commotion "What is going on out there?"

Just as those words escape her lips she hears Vanessa cry out, "No!! Stop it Declyn!! Nothing happened!!"

Grabbing her skirts Nina jumps off the pedestal and runs out of the room. Guided by the commotion she runs into the library just as Declyn grabs Nicki by his shirt collar and pulls back his fist.

"STOP!!" yells Nicolette grabbing Declyn's arm just as it is about to connect with Nicholas's face.

"What on God's green earth is going on here?"

"Who are you?" Shouts Declyn in effort to shake her off his arm.

Nicolette slips in between the two men in attempts of separating them further.

Trystan is visibly shaken and Josephine is whimpering in the corner.

"After all the time that you have been gone is this how you wish to be reunited with your family? With a hysterical wife and frightened and crying children?"

Walking around Declyn she instructs the children's nanny, "Bridget take the children outside they need not witness this."

"Djeco, idite s dadiljom. (Children go with the nanny.) Budite bez brige sve je uredu, ovo je samo nesporazum. (Do not fret this is just a misunderstanding.)"

The children nod and follow Bridget out. Closing the door behind them she turns back to the adults.

"Who would like to explain what is going on here?"Nicolette says in an exasperated tone.

"First how about you tell me who you are?" He says to Nicolette.

Exasperated he turns to his wife "Who is this Vanessa?"

Blushing Vanessa explains.

"Well how is it that I have never heard of her?"

"Truth be told none of us have. Apparently she has kept her a secret from all of us." Nicholas chimes in.

Just as she is about to respond the doors open and Vivianne enters.

"I thought I heard your voice. Oh my boy I am so glad to have you back, now we are one big happy family. Well... almost if only your brother was here." She says wistfully.

"Big perhaps but apparently not happy." Comments Nicolette under her breath but just loud enough for all to hear.

Confused Declyn embraces his mother. "Mother, when did you arrive?"

"I have been here for several days now; I came to cheer everyone up as they were all missing you so terribly."

"Don't you fell like a fool, did you really think that I would be having a torrid affair with your mother under the same roof. As for Nicki he arrived just last night. You really have to learn to control your temper Declyn." Says Vanessa angrily.

"Yes Declyn you really have to learn to control yourself, and while we are at it how about an apology?"

With a scornful look at Nicki, Declyn turns his attentions back to his wife who seconds Nicki's statement.

"I do believe that he is right, apologies are in order, to us all. After eleven years you think you could trust me, have I not proven to you my love and devotion?"

"Of course you have my love, I should never have doubted you."

Turning to Nicki he continues "I hope that you can forgive me, it was wrong of me to assume that you would do anything to sabotage my marriage."

With a playful smirk Nicki nods accepting the apology.

Declyn continues his apologies and walks up to Nicolette, "Miss Martin I thank you for intervening and preventing me from doing something foolish. Furthermore I must ask for your forgiveness, you should not have had to witness such poor behavior on my part."

"All is forgiven, but please go and see to the children, I do believe they will be needing the most comforting."

"Yes, thank you." With that he and Vanessa leave the room in search of the children.

Gathering her skirts Nicolette turns to those remaining "Now that this is settled I must return to my fitting, if you will excuse me."

As she is walking out she hears Nicki call out her name. "Nicolette!..."

Catching up to her he takes her by the hand and continues "I also wish to thank you for intervening."

He bows before her and kisses her hand, with his lips still hovering he looks up at her and continues "though I hope you know that I did not need rescuing."

Pulling her hand away she says sarcastically "Oh, well that was some apology," turning away from him she walks away and throws her departing comment over her shoulder "next time I will just stand by and watch him pummel you, I do believe you deserve someone taking you down a peg or two."

"Is that so?" he responds back.

"Just to be clear, I only intervened because I rather not have had my escort be black and blue, while accompanying me." With that she slams the door behind her.

"I do like her spirit, I really do."

"What was all the commotion out there? asks Evangeline.

"Oh it was a showdown between Declyn and Nicholas, absolute childish behavior. If I didn't walk in and stop them they would have bludgeoned each other to death."

"Yes well mon chere they are and always will be mortal enemies. Declyn merely tolerated his presence because of Vanessa. If it was up to him he would ban him from not just his home but all of England as well."

Nicolette laughs out loud "I did not realize their hatred stems so deep. Do you think that Vanessa knows this?"

"Yes but I do think that she refuses to see it, she denies their palpable hatred for one another. She hopes that in time they will learn to coexist, for her sake anyway. Enough of that let us continue there is much for you to still try on."

With that they continue, Madame Soleigh brought more than a dozen gowns, furs and jewels. Final tweaks are performed and Olivia along with a few other maids carry it all up to her chamber.

"Well I dare say that was a rather successful appointment."

"I concur my dear. You have a keen eye for the latest fashions and the alterations that you have suggested are spectacular. Would you be interested in seeing a few sketches that I am currently working on? I would very much like your opinion on them."

"Thank you, and if I can be of any assistance I would gladly help."

"Excellent I shall send for a coach one day next week if that is all right with you."

"Yes perfectly. Au revoir Madame."

"Au voir, cher."

Walking up the stairs she enters her chamber, exhausted she plops on the bed ready for a nap. Olivia walks out of the closet and says:

"Miss, you received a note from the Doctor. It is on your nightstand."

"A note, when did this arrive?"

"During the alteration, I felt it was best if I put it up here for safe keeping. I was going to give it to you after your appointment was over."

Opening the letter Nina reads it "It is an invitation to a dinner tomorrow night at the Doctors home."

"Oh splendid, it will be a chance for you to wear a new gown. We must tell her Grace she will be so very excited. Though it is interesting there was no invitation for the rest of the family."

"It says here that if I wish I can bring an escort, though he says it is not necessary he will gladly perform that function for the night. I will discuss this with Vanessa."

"Yes I do think that is wise."

"Livy I am exhausted if you do not mind I will be taking a nap."

"Yes I will come back to wake you when it is time to ready for dinner."

With those parting words Nina is already asleep.

Chipper and elated, Nina makes her way into the dining room. Everyone is already in their seats waiting for her.

"I see everyone has decided to join us" she nods to all and finds her seat beside Nicki.

Turning to him she says "It is nice of you to grace us with your presence."

"Yes as lovely as it is for you to grace us with yours." He says smugly.

Not paying him any attention Nina turns to Vanessa "This morning I received an invitation from Nathaniel inviting me to a dinner party tomorrow. I am excited to go."

"Well isn't that lovely of the Doctor. What is the party for my dear?"

"I do believe he will be inviting a few of his colleagues and friends, I am sure it will be a rather enlightening evening."

"Oh yes well, luckily you will have Nicki to escort you."

"No need the Doctor has agreed to perform that function. I dare not inconvenience Monsieur Deveroux."

"Nonsense Nicki has agreed to be your chaperone for all events, that is if you wish to have him."

"Yes my dear do you wish to have me..." he looks up at Vanessa who blushes deeply at her blunder, and then he looks back and Nina continuing "... have me, escort you that is."

"Well how could I say no, to such a kind and heartfelt invitation."

Looking all smug Nicki picks up his wine and takes a sip, as Nina continues "But I regretfully must decline."

"You what?" Nicki sputters out unable to catch his breath.

Nina stands and slaps him hard on his back, with that his breath returns to normal.

"You decline my offer?" he chokes out.

"Yes, though I will most surely need your assistance when it comes to the balls, a simple dinner I do believe I will be able to attend by myself."

"I do believe she is right Nicki."

"Nicolette, I insist on escorting you, I did not decide to stay just to be at your beck and call."

"I have made my decision and I do hope you will respect it."

"Oh I do respect it my dear thought, I do not see what you will be doing while the Doctor and his associates have their discussions. You must be aware that most of these gentlemen will not have their spouses nor their betrothed with them. You will surely tire of their conversation quickly and be left with no means to gracefully excuse yourself of their company. I have attended such parties and I do believe I know the course the conversation will take."

"Did you just insult my intelligence by assuming that I am not astute enough to be able to partake or understand the topics discussed?"

"I..." before he could utter another syllable she cuts him off.

"Monsieur Deveroux do you know what happens when you assume? No, well let me enlighten you, you make an ass out of you and me. Therefore, I ask you not insult me by assuming that I am the typical female that you have encountered in the past."

Getting up she turns to the rest of the table "I am sorry to inform you that I have lost my appetite, and I will be retiring for the night. If you will excuse me."

As she gets up to leave Vanessa pleads "Oh, don't Nina please sit and eat, Nicki did not mean any of it did you Nicki."

"Come now Vanessa the old boy just got his ego handed to him on a silver platter. Good show Nicolette, you surely put him in his place. I can see now why Vanessa is so fond of you."

Walking over to her he guides her back to her chair and says "Nicki has no experience with women with minds of their own. For which you cannot blame him wholly, so we ask that you forgive him and allow him

to make amends by escorting you tomorrow." Declyn says with a grin on his face.

"Of course if you are not satisfied, you can send him on his merry way. I have a few chaps in mind who will gladly take his place. Men who know how to treat a lady of your caliber."

"Please!" whispers Vanessa.

"Well since you asked so nicely I will allow him to escort me."

Looking like a sullen child Nicki does not utter a word throughout the whole meal. By the time desert is served no one even remembers the incident that unfolded just a few hours ago. Once dinner is over he excuses himself and leaves, and does not return for the rest of the evening. As the night comes to a close Nina says her goodnights and walks up to her chamber. Entering it she finds a note on the floor, she opens it.

Dear Nicolette,

Please forgive me for my boorish behavior this evening. I hope that we can put it behind us and you enjoy tomorrow night's festivities.

Yours truly,

Nicki

'Well at least he had the courage to apologize to me. It does seem that no matter what century men never cease to amaze me with their ignorance and utter fear of a strong, intelligent, independent woman.' With that parting thought she retires for the night.

Waking up she looks at her watch only to see it is well past the breakfast hour.

What?!? Why didn't Olivia wake me?

She gets herself up and gets herself ready. Walking down the steps she goes to the sun room, but there is no one there.

"Where is everyone?"

As the words escape her lips she hears someone call out "Madame."

Turning Nina sees Bridget "Where is everyone? Why didn't Olivia wake me?"

"The family left early and Olivia went along with them. They went into the city for the day. They will be returning for dinner. I will be assisting you in your preparation for tonight. I would imagine you are famished; breakfast is being served on the veranda as it is a beautiful day."

Walking out to the veranda she sees Nicki reading the newspaper and sipping his tea.

As he sees her approach he sets the paper down raises from his chair and bows to her.

"Good morning chere. I hope that you slept well."

"Good morning to you Monsieur, yes I had a rather restful night, so restful in fact that I did not hear the family leave for the day. Did you know of their plans?"

"No I did not. I was just as surprised as you were."

Standing behind her he pulls out her chair and assists her in sitting down. As he joins her Bridget comes out with Nina's breakfast and fresh tea.

"I wish to apologize for last night, my outburst was uncalled for, and I hope that you received my note."

"Yes I did, thank you very much and I will accept your apology only if you accept mine. It was rude of me to reject your offer after you so kindly offered to stay for the me. I would be honored if you escorted me to tonight's dinner party. That is if you are still willing to take me."

"Nothing would make me happier, chere."

She smiles at him in appreciation and begins to eat her meal.

"All my plans today included the children, I am at a loss as what I will do today?"

"It is a beautiful morning if you are so inclined we could go for a ride and explore the grounds. It has been quite a while since I have been here. There are some wonderful trails on the property that I would like to show you."

"Yes that would be enjoyable, thought I must warn you am not the best rider, Tristan has given me a few lessons though I am not much of an equestrian just yet."

With a hardy laugh he responds "Do not worry chere I will take excellent care of you."

"I am done with my breakfast, allow me to don something more appropriate, I will return in a few minutes. Please tell John to ready my usual horse."

Bowing to her he retorts "Yes Mademoiselle, I will see you shortly."

Disappearing into the house she runs up to her room and puts on the new riding outfit that she designed with Evangeline's help. Examining herself in the mirror she smiles, "I can't wait to see what his reaction to it will be."

With that parting thought she glides down the stairs and out the back to the veranda; taking her time she walks to the stables. As she rounds the bend she comes into Nicki's field of vision.

"That should be illegal; no woman should be allowed to don men's chaps. Especially not one with such a figure, and here I thought that only Vanessa had the audacity to wear such attire."

The stunned look on his face brings her to a stop; standing before him she says "Tell me what you think of my new riding ensemble?" She turns to give him a three-sixty view.

Seeing her prance around him giving him quite an eye full Nicki laughs and says. "You and Vanessa are surely cut from the same cloth. She is the only other woman that I have ever known to have the confidence to wear such garments."

"Do I do it justice?" she says as she poses for him.

Shocked by her cheeky behavior he is momentarily speechless, he mounts his horse and turning back to her he answers "You do chere, you do."

"Thank you" she says with a wicked grin as she mounts her own mare.

As they ride they keep a light conversation, Nicki even gives her helpful riding hints.

After some time he asks "I am famished, how about you?"

"I am if we turn back now we should be home in time for supper."

Coming to a lovely spot Nicki jumps off his horse "Well luckily I packed us a picnic." With awe and surprise she exclaims "You did, oh that is rather sweet!"

Standing before her horse he asks "Do you need assistance dismounting?"

"No, I think I can manage, I must learn sometime."

Watching her struggle he chuckles to himself, finally frustrated she says in an exasperated tone "How about some pointers?"

With his instruction she manages to dismount flawlessly. Walking over she sees that he has already laid out the blanket and the food is served.

"I must say that I am impressed, Nicki." Standing before her he bows in thank you and attempts to assists her in taking her place.

"Oh no need for that it is far simpler to seat oneself in pants then in one of those contraptions. I am far more comfortable in pants than I am in dresses."

Taken back by this comment he sits himself across from her and begins to help himself to the feast.

"Really, and how is that?"

"Well all my life I have been something of a tom boy and have always preferred pants to a dress. Though like any woman I can appreciate a beautifully dress and how it makes me feel. But they are just not very functional, and you would not believe how heavy and uncomfortable some of those contraptions are."

Raising one eyebrow he encourages her "Really, please do enlighten me!"

As she rambles on with her explanation he cannot keep his eyes off his her lips. Once his brain has imprinted them fully his eyes travel lower, forging a path that his lips ache to follow.

"I find it rather liberating to be able to wear pants. I wish I could... Nicki why are you looking at me like that?"

"Oh I am sorry I was just..."

"Just looking like you would want to eat me." "Literally" she says with a laugh.

"Well..." he thinks to himself "I did not realize that was part of the menu".

"What are you thinking? Am I boring you? Have I spoken for too long, my mother always tells me I talk too much. I am sorry."

"There is nothing to apologize for I enjoyed listening to you speak. Most women just prattle on and on about the most tiresome subjects. It is refreshing to be in the presence of someone with a mind of her own."

Coyly she thanks him for his kind words.

Rolling over on to her back she toys with a wild flower whilst dreamily staring up at the sun filtering through the tree. She kicks off her boots letting the sensation of the unspoiled wild grass tickling her feet send shivers down her spine. Rising on to her elbows she lifts one hand up into her hair and pulls the

ribbon letting her hair tumble around her in rich amber waves.

Mesmerized by the sight of her luxuriating in their surroundings he can't help himself he begins to reach for her when he hears he speak.

"Ah... that is so much better."

With her eyes still closed she stretches lazily like a cat "Nicki thank you for bringing me here, this is paradise."

Snapping back to reality he returns to his side of the blanket. Not wanting to get caught up in her allure again he begins to gather their things.

"I do think it is time for us to begin the trip back to the mansion."

She opens her eyes and helps him. "Yes, let me give you a hand."

"No need I do believe that is everything. You can help me fold the blanket thought" he says with a smile.

Pulling on the riding boots and tying her hair back up she assists him. Together they carry all the things to Nicki's horse.

"Do you mind helping me up, there is no step stool and I have yet to master this."

At first he considers instructing her but as he is about to a light wind blows and a strand of her hair escapes the ribbon. Struggling against the urge to pull it away from her face he walks up to her, without a word he puts his hands around her waist and lifts her into the saddle. Looking up at her he fights the need to pull her back down and kiss that beautiful smile off her face. Returning to his horse, he swings himself up in the saddle and they are off.

The ride back is quiet; Nicki is contemplative and confused while Nina is blissfully enjoying the sensations of her surroundings. As they make their way to the stables Nina thanks him for the enjoyable day.

"Till tonight, chere" he responds and with that Nina makes her way to her chamber to ready herself for the evening ahead.

"What dress do you think I should wear Bridget?"

"Whichever you think is best Miss."

"I wish Olivia was here, I need her advice." She whispers to herself, turning to Bridget she continues "Olivia does much more than just help me dress. I need someone who can help me with every detail. I do not have much experience with such events and I need all the help that you can give me. I have an idea, how about we pick out a few dresses and you can try them on for me, so that it is easier for me to decide. A fashion show yay!!!"

"No Miss. I do not deem that to be proper."

"I do believe that it is I who decides what is proper, so go on get in there and select a few dresses and put them on. Have you ever worn such fineries? I would wager you never have, go and envelop yourself in luxury if only for a while."

With a smile Bridget walks into the closet and in the next hour she dons three dresses and revels in the beauty of them. Together the girls decide on an emerald green number which accents her eyes. After

a lavish bath, Bridget intricately arranges her hair, with pearls and she is ready to go. Examining herself in the mirror she applies her scarlet lipstick "thank goodness my purse contained practically every lipstick I own" and with that parting thought she is off.

Descending down the stairs she takes her time as she rounds the bend and she sees Nicki with his back turned to her. The ruffle of skirts brings his attention to the stairs just in time to see her effortlessly glide down and stand before him.

"You are a vision, taking a man's breath away."

Coyly she smiles "Why thank you Monsieur."

"Shall we be on our way then, the coach is waiting."

Holding the door open for her he escorts her out, just as they walk down the stairs, a coach approaches. It is the family back from their outing.

"Nina you look beautiful" doesn't she Momma says Josephine as she steps out of the coach.

"You really are a stunning" agrees Vanessa.

"And where pray tell have all of you been today? Why did you not tell me, us of your plans?"

"It was a last minute decision, we did not want to wake you, and you needed your rest for tonight."

"We really must be on our way, we do not wish to be late Nina." Nicki says as he directs her to their coach.

"Have a wonderful time my dear; we will be here when you return, that is if you do not stay out too late." She says giving Nicki a look, turning back to Nina she says. "If we are asleep I want a full report tomorrow."

Hugging her she whispering "I wish to know everything."

"Have a wonderful time my dear, and Nicki you take care of her, or you shall feel my wrath."

Escorting her into the coach Nicki closes the door behind himself and they wave to the family until they are out of sight.

"Are you nervous?" Nick asks sitting across from her.

"Yes" she says with a smile.

Taking her hand he looks into her eyes and he smiles encouragingly "I will be at your side; there is no need to worry, just enjoy yourself."

Holding on just a bit longer than he should, he smiles and finally releases her hand.

The horses come to a stop in front of a home not half as grand as Vanessa's but quite beautiful in its own right. Each window is lit by a single candle giving it a warm inviting feeling. She sees different coaches depositing the patrons on the front stairs where they are then greeted by the Doctor as they walk in.

Finally it's their turn, the horses come to a full stop, the footman opens the coach door Nicki exits first and he offers her his hand, she takes it and gracefully steps out. Seeing her the Doctor comes down to greet them.

"Nicolette I am so glad that you have decided to come, you look ravishing my dear" bowing before her he exclaims.

"Monsieur Devereux it is so good to see you again old chap. I see you have decided to be Nina's escort for

the evening. Splendid, though I must warn you I intend to whisk her away every now and then, there are some individuals that I would like for her to meet."

"Thank you for having me and whatever Nina wishes I shall comply with Nate."

"Excellent now in you both go, I must continue with my host duties."

With that they enter Nina's hand gently resting on the crook of Nicki's outstretched arm. Most of the guests are men of various ages, there are a few women in their company. Entering the parlor they are greeted by those already in attendance, Nicki taking great care to introduce her properly to all. At first the women were quite warm and inviting but once they have met her they gather into a corner whispering in secrecy.

Seeing her notice the women Nicki whispers in her ear "Do not fret chere, they are just envious of you. I imagine they have not a kind word to say to you, especially now that it appears that you have snagged

one of the most eligible and sought after bachelor in all of England."

She whispers back with a doe eyed look "Do you really think so, that they are envious because I am here with you?"

She swats his arm and continues " really Nicki you think far too highly of yourself, you best let some that hot air out of your head otherwise it will never fit into the coach."

Nicki laughs exuberantly and continues in a matter of fact tone "My dear you don't you know that you are in presence of greatness."

They both laugh but in a more serious tone Nicki's continues "I know that Nathaniel wishes to borrow you but I beg you do not leave me to these social vultures."

"Oh really so now you need my help, well isn't this a sudden turn of events. Perhaps I will take pity on you."

"You are most magnanimous my dear." He whispers into her ear sending shivers down her spine and the women into another fit of gossip.

With his hand on the small of her back he guides her out of the parlor and into the library where the men have gathered. Entering she is obviously nervous, so much so that Nicki takes pity on her and tightens the grip on her hand giving her a squeeze. Seeing her the Doctor comes over and escorts her in, seating her beside him.

"Gentlemen I would like to introduce you to Miss. Nicolette Martin."

At that all the men introduce themselves. Once they have take what she can only assume are their assigned positions they commence discussions of various topics.

Leaning towards her the Doctor whispers "Nina do you see that man by the fireplace?"

She nods "He is one of the most well known physicists in all of England I will introduce you to

him shortly. He is a self proclaimed genius, for that reason I do not know how much we can trust him."

Nodding his head to a man in the corner of the room he continues "That man there almost obscured by the darkness of the room that is Ephraim Scott. He is a promising young physicist not as much a glory hound as Pangbourn. He is quiet, reserved and I believe will see this for what it is a chance to make a scientific breakthrough not personal gain. Though the choice I leave up to you, I have not told either anything, you speak to each of them and you decide. Once you do I will arrange a second meeting when we will let one of them in on the secret."

"Hmm... yes I concur. Let me speak to Pangbourn first."

The Doctor escorts her over "Pangbourn my fine fellow, I wish to present to you Miss. Martin, she has heard quite a bit about your body of work and is fascinated."

Bowing to her he eyes her appreciatively "Has she now, well truth be told it would be quite difficult not to be impressed. My experience and knowledge are

intimidating to most as they are to you my dear, look you are rendered speechless by my mere presence." He adds flaunting about his jewel covered hand.

'What a repulsive ass, and I thought that Nicki was bad. Seriously look at him he looks like a gay pirate, is he wearing every piece of jewelry he owns. He is decked out like a Christmas tree.'

"Oh no Mr. Pangbourn, I am merely scrutinizing your demeanor. It does appear that your body of work is not as impressive as the size of your ego. I am currently looking for a serious man of science to assist me on working on a ground breaking theory, unfortunately it does seem that you are far more interested in the boasting of your exploits rather than achieving new ones. Thank you for your time." And she walks away before he can even respond.

"Well safe to say my dear you have a golden tongue and quite a temper, which you must learn to control. Men in this era are quite opposing to an opinioned woman. Thought I might add there a few who can appreciate a woman of your caliber. I beg you not to

burn too many bridges." He adds with a chuckle. "This way to Mr. Scott my dear."

"Nathaniel, Miss. Martin" Ephraim says bowing and taking her hand for a kiss.

"What was all that about, you left Pangbourn in quite a huff." He says with genuine interest.

"Well Miss. Martin did not quite appreciate his comments. You know how full of himself he is. She wishes to contract a man of science to aid her in her quest and apparently he was not what she was looking for."

"Any assistance I can provide you with I will gladly."

Smiling at him she asks "I need a man who's intentions are pure, the theory that I have come across and need help expanding upon is not one to be monetarily bountiful. Though I imagine one day it may be of some value. Are interested in a challenge Mr. Scott?"

"Always perhaps we can discuss this at a more private location." He suggests seeing that most ears

have peaked and are listening in on what is to be a private conversation.

"Yes I will make all the arrangements Ephraim." Says the Doctor.

"Very well till then Miss. Martin." He bows again.

"Thank you" she curtsies and turns to leave with the Doctor.

"Come my dear there it appears that Monsignor has yet again begun a debate with Lord Emmet."

Hearing the commotion she inquires "What about pray tell."

"What else God versus Science, it happens every time, I best go and see if I can keep the situation from escalating."

As he leaves Nicki appears at her side and ushers her to a seat.

"Have you missed me?"

"Apparently not as much as you've missed me. I see you are still in one piece, the vultures have not picked you apart."

"I have been in hiding, though I was here to witness you deflate Pangbourn's ego, and then continue on to Scott. What was that all about?"

"Do I sense a hint of jealousy?"

"Of Scott don't be preposterous."

"Yes of course." She adds seeing his face cloud with emotion.

He hands her a flute of champagne, she takes it and sips it hoping to calm her frayed nerves. By her third glass the debate has become quite heated and seems to be spiraling out of control. The library is packed and even the women have come in to listen. The room is divided thought the scientist seem to be the ones with the upper hand. Pangbourn is leading them, and Nina is happy to see that Mr. Scott is off to the side just a spectator thought he has chimed in on behalf of both sides.

The alcohol is now made her warm and fuzzy and given way to her inhabitations. After one quite vicious bout from both sides she stands to chime in herself. There is a look of horror on Nicki's face as

she slips his reach to enter the no man's land dividing the room. As she begins to speak a hush falls over the room.

"Gentlemen I have been listening to the argument from both sides and I am amazed that neither side has seen what is plain as day. Why must there be only one option? Why can't the mysteries of the universe be explained by both. Where science ends God begins. Unfortunately there are some conflicting theories but that is all left to interpretation. Who here believes that the universe is only as old as what the Old Testament states?"

A few hands go up "Alright now the Old Testament was dictated by the Holy Spirit to men, am I correct?" The men nod.

"Now tell me who here knows how God measures time? Is there anywhere in the bible that states this simple fact. No, as far as I know there is not. If God is all powerful all knowing do you think that he measures years the same as we do? I think not, I wish for you all to think back to when you were children, the younger you were the longer the days, were they

not, sometimes it seemed like it would take a century for one day to pass. But as you got older and acquired more knowledge the day's move quicker, now it seems that I blink and the week has passed, months fly by. Do you think it is not the same for God. Or perhaps he explained to men the time but their minds were not able to comprehend the nature of that span of time and so for their own purposes they wrote it differently."

"Yes she is correct human error is causing inconsistencies in the Bible." Yells out one scientist.

"Blasphemy, I say." Yells the Monsignor.

"But science cannot explain God out of the mysteries of life. Everything could not have come from nothing. The universe, life it all came from something, somewhere. And those parts where science is lacking for those mysteries we have to turn to the Bible, to that greater than ourselves. We are only human it is not for us to know all, if we did we would be God. It does appear gentlemen that we will forever argue over which came first the chicken or the egg."

With that the room erupts in laughter and Nicki sneaks into the circle and extract her. Escorting her out of the room he mutters to her "You are really something else Nicolette."

Exiting the room Mr. Scott follows "Miss Martin, that was educational and amusing I look forward to working with you. It is not every day that one comes across a woman who is able to tackle such an argument with such eloquence and conviction. You defused that situation beautifully. Till next time." He says bowing before her and kissing her hand.

At the sight of this Nicki is anoyed "I believe it is time for us to go, the hour is late. Goodbye Mr. Scott."

With that he ushers her out of the room and into the coach.

"It seems that you have acquired a few admirers with that speech of yours."

"Hmm... yes it appears that I have." She answers with a smile upon her lips not letting him spoil her high.

Seeing her happy with herself he smiles too and before they know it they are chatting about the

nights festivities. The coach comes to a stop and he helps her out, not wanting the night to end he suggests a night cap.

"I am wide awake and the house seems to be asleep, yes why not."

"Splendid I will fetch what we need and meet you in the gazebo." With that he leaves her.

She begins her walk admiring how beautiful and mysterious everything looks under the full moon. Still buzzing from the high of the earlier events she doesn't hear Nicki sneak up beside her.

"Some sherry for my chere."

Jumping out of her seat she lets out a yelp.

Setting down the drinks he pulls her to him "Oh I am so sorry my dear, I never meant to scare you."

"It's all right I was just so caught up in my thoughts that I did not hear you." She says turning in his embrace to face him "or were you trying to be sneaky and spy on me again." she continues whilst poking his chest with her finger.

With his hands up in surrender he laughs "No I was not, you must have just been deep in thought. If I may be so bold as to inquire what were you thinking about?"

Released from his hold she picks up her drink and walks over to the column and wraps her arm around it.

"I just the events that transpired tonight, it was wonderful meeting everyone I was shocked by some and amused by others. I was surprised that there was no dancing, I guess it was more of an intellectual gathering than social."

"You wished to dance? Why did you not say so." Bowing before her he extends his hand, with his head still bowed before her he asks "May I have the pleasure of this dance?"

"Here now, but there is no music."

"Ah but there is music in our hearts."

And with that he gallantly takes her in his arms and begins to waltz, shocked by his dexterity and grace she giggles in delight. The alcohol begins to take

effect and she is drowning in the moment, the moonlight, and in the arms of gorgeous man holding her firmly whilst humming a haunting tune. Drunk with the sensations of the moment she lets herself go for the first time since she landed beneath the cherry tree. Holding her tightly he spins her fast enough for her feet to lift off the ground. She laughs out loud and he finally sets her down but he is still holding her close, both are panting and smiling. She looks up at him and sees a lock slipped out of his perfectly manicured hair, pushing it back in place she smiles and puts her hands around his neck. Pulling herself on her tippy toes she raises her face closer to his, Nicki's breath begins to quicken, his eyes smolder as they bore into hers, she pulls her face closer to his. He tilts his head and closes his eyes as he brings his lips down, just as he does he hears her whisper in his ear "Nicki if we are to do this..."

"Mmmmm..." he whispers as he nuzzles her neck.

"...if you are to be my escort, you must promise me one thing."

"Anything chere." He says in a deep passion drenched voice "anything."

"Promise me you won't fall in love with me." With that he snaps back into realty, he lets her go and steps back, turning away from her.

Walking after him she puts her hand on his shoulder pulling him to look at her.

"Nicki, I just wish to make this a friendly experience, not a romantic one. I need you to know that I do not intend to stay here past the season and I do not wish to hurt anyone when I leave. As long as the lines are clearly drawn neither one of us will be upset."

Turning to her he continues "You need not worry about my feelings, chere I am a grown man, who has no intention of falling in love with you."

"Good then it is settled." Standing on her tippy toes she kisses him on the cheek.

"Goodnight, I had a wonderful time thank you for everything, I shall see you in the morning" with those parting words she walks out of the gazebo and back

into the house, leaving Nicki alone with this thoughts and rather surprising feelings.

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Chapter 4

At Water's Edge - Chapter 7

Chapter 7

Blindly she walks up to her room and closes the door. Holding on to the post of the bed she stagers over to the window, her hand on her lips which almost brushed his, she watches him out in the gazebo still standing in the same place where she left him. Grabbing her journal she clumsily sits on the sill and begins to write on the tear stained pages.

D,

So close, I was so close to letting go, letting him in, it would have been so easy. The look in his eyes was so pure he was so sweet; I didn't want to hurt him, or

lead him on. I cannot risk leaving a piece of myself here, I cannot. It would be so easy to love him, it would be so easy to fall for him and fall hard. But I know the ground would not be so kind to my foolish affections, that is why I need to keep him at arm's length.

God look at him, my heart goes out to him, he is so strong and proud but emotionally a confused boy. How do I look into those eyes and say no, when every inch of me screams YES!!

I must never permit myself to be in such a compromising position with him, next time I don't think I will have such restraint.

I have to pour all of my energy into my endeavor with Mr. Scott. This must be my only focus, well that and the children. I must tread carefully on this hollow ground.

Goodbye!

With a heavy heart and tears that have yet to cease she throws herself upon her bed. Crying herself to

sleep she eventually drifts off into a dreamless slumber.

In the morning she is waken by Olivia "Nina, Miss are you all right? You should have called on me to assist you in undressing, your dress is rumpled and look at your hair. If you do not mind me saying miss you look like something the cat dragged in."

"Truth be told I feel worse than I look. The lights are so bright close the curtains, please." She says squinting her eyes and burying her head in the sheets.

Attempting to get up she is tossed back on the bed, as the room is spinning uncontrollably.

"Ughhh... I have the most wicked head ache."

Olivia replies in a scalding tone "Well that should teach you, just because the champagne is plentiful does not mean you must drink your weight in it. And sherry with the Count for a night cap" shaking her head and tisking in a disapproving manner, "you are glutton for punishment." she laughs.

"At the time it seemed like a good idea, I was feeling warm and fuzzy from the alcohol the moonlight illuminated the gardens just so and... "

"And the Count was his usual charming self..." Olivia interjects with an all knowing laugh.

Sheepishly she continues "Well that too, how is a woman to say no to him. Why is he not married, I can't imagine a woman who would say no to him?" she says perplexed."You cannot imagine how hard it was for me to walk away from him."

"Well he is looking for something... more. He thought he found it in her Grace, but fate had other plans. And now it appears that he has set his sights on you, you lucky tart! All of London is a buzz with the news that the Count is smitten with a highly opinionated American. I expect for him to have some competition as suitors come to call and make his courting more difficult."

"No Livy" she shakes her head "there will be no courting. You know that I did not agree to participate in the seasons festivities for the purpose of acquiring

a husband. If it was up to me I would spend my days with the children and doing research."

"Well Miss perhaps fate will interject there as well."

"If I have anything to do with it, it won't" she says adamantly as she attempts to get out of bed yet again.

Impatiently she beckons her "Now help me here! Please bring me some water and fruit I need to rehydrate and get some electrolytes back if I am going to be at all functional today."

"Pardon Miss?"

"Do we have any apples, strawberries, pears, grapes? Any fruit will do my dear and a pitcher of water please."

"I will ring for it, are you sure you do not want anything with more substance?"

"Oh I don't think that my stomach can take anything more, perhaps later."

Helping her out of bed Olivia assists her in undressing and detangling the mess on top of her head. Nina luxuriates in a luke warm bath and takes

another nap. While she is asleep Olivia cleans up and readies her dress for the day. Dried and dressed Nina mashes up the food that is brought up and eats it slowly so as not to aggravate her already testy stomach. Sitting out on the balcony she absorbs some good old vitamin E, just as she is about to slip into yet another bout of slumber the door creeks open and Vanessa walks in.

"Nina are you here? Where are you child?"

"Out here" she says dreading the conversation that is surely to come.

Joining her out on the balcony, Vanessa is all smiles.

"Judging by the amount of time it has taken you to get up I gather it was a rather adventurous night." she says inquisitively but still somehow sounding assured.

"Yes well, by the smile on your face I gather that you probably know more about it than I remember."

Sitting herself in the chair next to Nina she excitedly exclaims "Oh you sent the tongues wagging, whatever did you do, better yet what did you say?"

Nina recounts the evening for her word for word, Vanessa never interrupts that is until Nina conveniently ends her story at their arrival at the mansion.

"And then?"

"No and then."

Clearing he throat "Ahem..." she stares at Nina "and then!"

"Oh you probably know it all already don't make me re-live it. I feel horrible as is" she pleads dramatically throwing her head back covering her eyes with the back of her hand.

"And then!" Vanessa say's insistently.

Tossing her hands up in the air Nina stands up and moves the conversation into the room, sitting herself in a lounger she continues, telling Vanessa everything.

"Oh you wicked, wicked girl. Well I hope for your sake that you plan on pursuing this relationship, because leaving him like that you only challenged

him. If I know Nicki and I do, that little speech you made will not deter him from his ultimate goal."

"Don't tell me that!!" she howls as she abruptly stands and begins to pace bout the room. "How, what, what am I suppose to do now. I really do not wish to hurt him; you know that I am only looking to go home. I do not wish to fall for someone and jeopardize all this hard work. I have even commissioned Mr. Scott to assist me."

"Yes well you should have thought of that before you decided to take him up on his offer." she says shaking her head.

"I know he can be charming, I fell for that smile and for that smoldering look in his eye, but you need to set boundaries with that one. If you give him a finger he will take the whole hand."

"Can't you just say something to him to dissuade him from entertaining this ludicrous idea further?"

"I can try but I can tell you right now it will be to no avail, he will not stop until he gets what he wants and apparently he wants you!"

"Aghhhh..." Nina howl's in exasperation throwing herself on the chase, smothering herself in the pillows.

"Ok so what am I to do, how should I handle this?"

"I am not entirely sure, thought I would suggest you limit the amount of time you spend in his presence."

"Well I will be putting allot more time into my research with Mr. Scott. The remainder of my time will be spent with the children, I have not forgotten about them."

"Very well, now go and get yourself dressed and ready, Josephine cannot wait to see you. We are working in the garden, would you like to join us? I do think the fresh air would do you some good."

Wearily Nina gets up and walks over to her dressing room. "Where is he today?"

"He will be gone for the rest of the day giving you ample time to figure out how you would like to proceed."

Looking at her more closely Vanessa is skeptical " Are you sure you do not wish nature to take its course in this matter?"

"No..." shaking her head "I do not know... a part of me wants this; it would be like a summer romance. But I am not the type of person who can pursue this and not get attached. I could never take him with me and I don't know how I would feel about leaving my family and my life in the future."

Her emotions are as plain as day as the turmoil inside has slipped its surly bonds and begun fighting the battle upon her face.

"My more practical side is telling me not to get involved. I am scared that if I even allow myself to think about it, I will most likely give up entirely on the idea of home and stay. And that is something that right now I cannot allow to happen."

With her eyes pleading she turns back to Vanessa

"I know you wish that I would stay and by me falling in love, you would be guaranteed to have me, but what happens if it doesn't work out and because I

stayed I missed my one chance to go home. What then, what will come of me then? No, I will stay on the straight and narrow and I am counting on you to reprimand me if I overstep my bounds; and if he asks tell him that I am affianced or have someone waiting for me at home. Please..."

Walking over to her Nina takes Vanessa by the hands and makes her swear to help.

"Very well if that is what you wish I will do what you ask of me. I will leave you now join us when you can, I will make sure that Josephine does not disturb you."

With a kiss on Nina's cheek Vanessa leaves and closes the door.

Emotionally spent Nina drags herself over to the dressing room and has Olivia help her dress. Still hung over she numbly walks to the kitchen to make herself a very strong cup of caffeinated tea to help her wake up.

As she is about to enter she hears the kitchens a buzz.

"Did you hear"... "I knew it, she couldn't wait to get her hands on him"... "Heard he was devastated, his footman said he was worse for wear"... "Seems she is keeping her options open perhaps she will seduce the Earl and have em compete"... "Harlot!"

Having heard enough she slams open the door and marches into the room her head held high.

"Good morning everyone. Today will be a full day for you; I have given the Chef some rather interesting recipes for dinner. I hope your fingers will be as nimble as your tongues in assisting him it will be quite a feast today. I will be coming down to check on the proceedings every so often, I hope you will not disappoint."

Walking over to the tea kettle she pours herself a steeping cup. "What I would give for a nice hot cup of Turkish coffee, I guess this will have to do." She whispers to herself through clenched teeth.

"If anyone is in need of me I will be in the gardens with her Grace and the children." With that she walks out the back door.

Outside she is still fuming 'but that is to be expected' she says to herself in attempts to put the matter behind her.

"It doesn't matter what they think as long as those that matter the most know the truth." "I won't be here much longer in any case." She continues out loud.

With that she seems to have a more positive outlook as she steps out of the shadow into the gardens. She already hears the children's laughter which pushes the remaining ill thoughts to the distant corners of her mind.

"Well aren't the three of you busy bees today" she exclaims.

Josephine rushes to her and practically knocks her down "Mind her dress Josephine; we do not want it dirty before she has had a chance to enjoy it." Vanessa adds with a wink.

Settling herself beside Vanessa they preen the roses whilst the children help weed the beds.

"They enjoy getting their hands dirty." Nina whispers watching the children muck about.

"Oh that they do. I think it is important for them to learn to appreciate the fineries in life by having them perform some of the daily work the staff does."

"Really, that is rather refreshing is that a common practice among the privileged?"

"Heavens no" she shakes her head profusely "I do not think that some of them wipe their own behinds!' she adds with a giggle.

"I refuse to raise my children in such a manner. They are responsible for certain chores, especially when it comes to their rooms. They make their beds or in Josephine's case assist; they put away their toys and help tidy up. If there is a gathering I have the maid staff do it for vanity sake, otherwise it is their responsibility. We also give them an allowance that is why we were out yesterday. They had both accumulated enough to go and spend it on anything that they wish."

"I have to say that I am impressed at your forward thinking it explains why they are such well rounded children."

"Yes and with the education you are providing them, I expect them to be even better. Josephine looks up to you so and I have seen a change in Tristan's thinking. He is much more serious and taking interest in things he never had before. Did you know that the other day he asked Nathaniel if he could take him with him to a Medical Symposium? My son not just a Duke but a doctor to boot, a mother could not be prouder."

"They are both exceptional and I see great things before them, not just titles and privileged frivolousness."

"So I hear that we will taste some interesting cuisine tonight."

"Yes, Gaston and I have been working on some interesting combinations. It is not as simple to cook certain dishes that I am accustomed to, due to the fact that the necessary ingredients are either not in season or are not available in mass quantities on this

continent. Therefore, we had to substitute but I do think that we will have a successful meal."

"Nicki will be back just in time, wait till he learns you can cook too!" as the words escape her lips she sprints into a run.

As the full implication of the words hit Nina she runs after her "Oh you!!! That is not funny!!!"

After a few minutes of chasing both women collapse in the high grass laughing, hearing the commotion the children joined in the chase and have now joined the playful raucous.

"Tell us a story." asks Josephine

"Well I never told you the ending of the Little mermaid, how about that?"

They all nod in unison and she continues the story where they left off. As usual she includes the children in the retelling and sings the songs. The acoustics in the meadow are perfect, and her voice carries all over the estate.

Brining his horse over to the stables Nicki hears giggling off in the distance,

attributing it to the play of the children he pays no attention to it. Turning back to the house he hears singing as it is carried across the meadow. For a split moment his heart skips a beat when he realizes it is Nina.

"Stupid man letting a woman get to you like that." he scolds himself and purposefully walks into the mansion.

Entering his chamber he is striping off his clothes and disgustedly tosses them about the room as Giles picks them up after him.

"Sire you really must learn to handle this better. She told you her feelings if you are to respect them you must not let her affect you so."

"Don't Giles, I am not in the mood."

"You are definitely in a mood just not a pleasant one" he whispers under his breath. "How did your meeting go?" he asks in hopes the change in topic will bring about a change in his mood.

"Fine all the conditions were met so we signed all the necessary paperwork. I hope this venture pans out if it does it would double my fortune." under his breath he comments "perhaps then she would find me more suitable."

Hearing the venomous comment the butler interjects "I have not had much interaction with the young Miss but, I have on good authority that she is not one to care about your finances. Her maid tells me she is here only for the season and that she is planning to return to the Americas upon its close. She had no intention in participating in the season's festivities but the Duchess persuaded her. If what I have heard for the rest from the staff is true the young Miss came here with just the clothes on her back. Her Grace financed her wardrobe; she must be some friend in deed if she has such an alliance with the Duchess."

Standing before the mirror deep in thought Nicki examines his five o'clock shadow. "Really so perhaps she needs a wealthy benefactor" he says his mind already calculating his next move.

"Or is she waiting for someone with a more prestigious title. She better not be holding out for the other Wakefield, I will be dammed if I loose another woman to this family. Yes that must be it!"

"Sire, I do not think that Miss. Martin is as diabolical as you believe her to be." Scrunching his shoulders he continues "but if you are so concerned perhaps you should have a word with her Grace, before you brand the young Miss a fortune chaser just for refusing your advances. Her Ladyship has always had you best interest at heart and I believe will give you the most reliable answer."

Nicki grumbles in agreement his mood still black as her retires to his bedroom.

As the story comes to a close everyone is ready to go back indoors. The sun has hidden itself beyond the forest, the spot that they are in is in shadow and the soft wind has become a chilly one.

"Let us retire to the house it is time for us to begin preparation for the evening's festivities."

Before making her way to her room she stops in the kitchen to return her cup and to see how the dinner is coming along, perhaps Gaston is in need of her assistance.

"Mon Chere, you arr ear! Zis iz going to bee fantastique, zi recepiez arr delightful. Everysing iz under kontrol du not frett, go and get ready." he bows before her and ushers her out the door. Laughing Nina leaves and makes her way up to her quarters.

Olivia is already there pressing the newest dress the sizzling red one.

"I thought this one would be perfect don't you agree." says Livi with a devious smile.

"It is a beautiful dress, why are you smiling like that?" says Nina perplexed by Olivia's rather unusual cheeky disposition.

"There is no reason miss, I am just commenting on the beauty of the dress. Is red not the color of desire..."

Cutting her off Nina turns to her maid "And what is that suppose to mean? Was that Vanessa I saw

skulking out and down the servant's stairs? Olivia did she suggest this dress."

Shaking her head Olivia reply's sarcastically "No...Miss... I picked this out all by myself. It does not matter what dress you choose all of them will look devastatingly gorgeous on you. Unless you put on some burlap, thought I doubt the Count would care or even notice."

"Oh NO not you too, am I to be the butt of all of your jokes tonight? If I am I will be having my dinner right here! "She sits herself down in the chase, her arms crossed pouting like a child.

"Now Nina, stop acting like an insolent child, we are just having a bit of fun at your expense. You may wear whatever you wish and no one will say a word about it, this is just between us." she says as she sits next to Nina and hugs her slouching figure.

With sorrow in her voice she asks "Do you think that I made an error rejecting him so? Vanessa says he will deem it a challenge."

"Who knows with the fickle hearts of men, their largest organ is their ego."

Laughing at the comment Nina brightens up and they begin getting ready. After a few hours she puts the finishing touches on her face just as there is a knock at the door. Olivia goes to open it and sees the Count standing before her.

Bowing she gestures him in "My Lord, my lady is just about ready please have a seat and I will announce you."

"Thank you Olivia" he says as he enters fidgeting nervously with a velvet box.

Olivia's eye is drawn to the box, noticing Nicki stops fidgeting and clasps his hands behind his back.

In that moment Nina walks into the room, she almost stumbles at the shock of seeing him but regains her composure just in time. As Olivia walks past her she whispers something about a box, confused Nina disregards the comment.

"Monsieur Deveroux what a pleasant surprise" she bows.

"I have been asked by our hostess to come and escort you down to the dining room and I wished to present you with a small symbol of my affections" he says producing the box.

Panicked at the sight of the box she is at a loss "You need not do that." she says trying to avoid the uncomfortable situation.

"I insist" he replies and opens the box. Inlaid is a beautiful yet simple diamond necklace of yellow gold. The chain is very long with finely braded stands of gold sprinkled with diamonds of various sizes. It is stunning and her mouth is a gape, Nicki smirks with satisfaction seeing the exact reacting he was hoping for.

Nicki steps closer to clasp it about Nina's neck, but instead she takes a step back. She holds out her hands and he places the chain in her outstretched palm. Taking it from him, she loops it twice before clasping it and letting it rest upon her breast.

Admiring it in the mirror she says "It is divine but completely unnecessary. Thank you I will treasure it forever."

She turns and takes his arm allowing him to escort her to the feast. As they descend she spies him admiring her from the corner of her eye. At a loss she tries to expedite their walk to the dining room, but it appears that the Count has something else entirely in mind.

He walks her toward the dinning room but as the footmen are about to open the doors Nicki shakes his head and they seize.

In full panic mode Nina is becoming flustered "Are we not going in?" looking up at him she turns back to the footmen and signals them to open the doors.

At that moment Nicki directs her toward the back of the house and out to the veranda.

"I need to speak to you privately" he whispers.

"Umm... I think it best if we go in, they are all waiting" she says insistently.

"This will only take a moment and we will join them shortly."

Setting her on a chair he continues "I just wish to let you know that I do not want that which transpired last night to strain our already fragile friendship. My primary function will be to escort you and I will do so gladly, there will be nothing other between us unless the feeling is mutual. I enjoy your company immensely and do not wish to be deprived of it for the fear of what could be. You have made your feelings quite clear and I will abide by them to the best of my ability."

Breathing a sigh of relief she smiles and restrains herself from jumping up and giving him a big hug. She settles on an appreciative smile and a handshake.

"Thank you Nicki you are a true gentleman. You do not know how much I appreciate your cooperation in this situation."

"Now shall we join the other guests they must be famished, the kitchens have been locked all day in preparation."

"Lets" raising her open palm she places it on his outstretched hand and they ceremoniously walk into the dinning room. All heads turn as they enter.

"They do make the most beautiful pair" remarks the Dowager to Vanessa.

"Yes they do, it is a shame she is so stubborn."

"Well perhaps she is keeping her options open; there are many fine men still out there, perhaps even our Steven. Speaking of that boy have you received a response, when will he decide to join us?"

"I do not recall a post from him, you may wish to consult Decklyn in that regard." with that Vanessa walks over to her dear friends and greets them.

"You look dashing as always Nicki" giving him a peck on the cheek.

"And Nina you are simply stunning" giving her friend a hug and a kiss to each cheek.

Studying her from head to toe Vanessa notices that Nina is self consciously playing with a beautiful necklace, one she did not provide her with.

"That is quite a necklace my dear where ever did you get it?"

Blushing she quietly whispers "It was a gift from Nicki."

"Oh I see" she says not surprised looking from the necklace to Nicki.

"Well no one can doubt your taste in jewelry that piece is dazzling almost as striking as the woman wearing it."

"Yes almost." he says giving Nina a quick appreciative look out of the corner of his eye.

Turning to everyone Vanessa says "Please everyone be seated the feast is about to begin."

The meal begins and the atmosphere is light and enjoyable, the food is magnificent. Toasts are made to congratulate the chef and his sous-chef on a spectacular meal.

As the conversation flows so does the wine, all troubles seem to melt away even Nina has relaxed and is interacting and being rather friendly with

Nicki. He has been treating her kindly apparently no longer vexed about the prior night's proceedings'.

"I will have to speak to him about this whole mess, but that is the best left for another day." Vanessa ponders whilst observing him.

Coming out of her thoughts she sees Nina giddy with laugher swatting Nicki's arm playfully. In the merriment the rest of the group joins in as Nicki shares the tall tale.

Fighting to stay awake both children have lost the battle and have slipped into slumber. Decklyn picks up Tristan whilst Nina lifts Josephine out of her lap and hands her over to Vanessa who along with Decklyn walks the children up the stairs.

Upon their leaving the party is moved to the veranda as the warm night has coaxed them out. The deserts as well as the after dinner drinks are served outdoors. The women have moved to one corner of the terrace and the men are smoking their cigars on the other.

Decklyn and Nicki have started a fiery game of chess, which has quickly escalated into a completive match. Fascinated by the game Nina walks over to take a seat between the two men.

Passions are high as both men are determined to win 'so long to the truce, which surprisingly sprang up during the dinner' thinks Nina to herself. 'Men! Everything is a pissing contest, they should just whip em out.'

The picture she has painted herself is so funny she has trouble containing herself. Through a particular tense moment she can no longer keep the laughter within, she bursts out laughing and everyone turns to look at her quizzically.

"I'm sorry ha, ha, ha... I'm sorry" with her hand over her mouth she tries to stifle her laughter. She attempts to excuse herself from the table but instead doubles over in laughter. As she attempts to stand her chair clatters to the floor and takes her down with it. This brings the men out of their trance and Nicki attempts to assist her getting up but instead she manages to pull him down with her, both are rolling

on the floor in stitches. Seeing the silliness the rest of the family joins in. Decklyn attempts to help Nina up and Vanessa gives a hand to Nicki, the next thing you know they are all on the floor rolling about drunk as skunks.

Viviane happy to see them all enjoying themselves excuses herself for the night and is escorted back inside by the Doctor. Their goodbyes and goodnights fall upon deaf ears.

After quite some time the laughter dies down the men help their respective ladies off the ground.

"It is a beautiful night I think I would like to take a walk, would anyone care to join me?"

Seeing that Nicki is about to step up Decklyn beats him to it "would you like me to show you the grounds my dear, there are some parts that only show their true beauty by moonlight."

"Excellent!" she exclaims, she places her hand on the crook of his arm and they walk down the stairs into the night, leaving Nicki and Vanessa to their own devices.

"Well that was a surprise" says Nicki.

"What do you mean?"

"He left you and I alone, I am shocked that he would after that scene in the library."

"He may be rash but he is not unreasonable. In any case there is something that is wish to discuss with you."

'There is no time like the present' she thinks to herself.

Looking slightly uncomfortable Nicki turns from her whilst rubbing the back of his neck.

"What pray tell about?"

"What are your intentions Nicki?"

"I do not know what you are implying?"

"I see how you look at her; I remember those looks, it was not too long ago that I was subject to them." She says light heartedly.

"Yes well I do believe that is between her and me. I do not intend to make a public spectacle of myself."

She interjecting "It is too late for that I fear, that dinner made it all too clear."

"What do you want me to say Nessa, she made the decision for me."

Shocked she asks "And you will respect her decision?"

"You know her better than I, do I really have a choice?"

She says flabbergasted "Well I do say..."

Looking pained he interjects "But why Nessa? Is there someone else? Is she weighing all her options? Is she waiting for someone better?"

Vanessa laughs in surprise of his crumbling ego "I'm sorry love, I cannot believes he has made you second guess yourself?"

"Darling you are wonderful, she thinks the world of you, but she does have a fiancé."

"A fiancé?!? Why did you not tell me?"

"Well not quite a fiancé but she has someone waiting for her at home."

"So there is still hope." He says brightly.

"No Nicki, please understand" she begs.

"As long as she is not waiting for someone better, money or title wise I have a chance."

"No Nicki please respect her choice" she says adamantly.

"Why so someone else can worm their way in. I will be dammed if I let someone take a woman like that from me again, I would hate myself for not putting up a good fight. Moreover, I would loose my mind if...if another Wakefield came in and took that which was mine for the taking first."

Angry she retorts "Really Nicki is she a prized mare to be traded and bid on! She better not hear you speak of her this way. She will give you a piece of her mind and will not do so kindly!"

Calming down she continues in a pleading tone "Nicki she doesn't want any one she just wants to go home. If it was up to her she would be staying in with the children and return home by the end of the month. It is because of me she is staying to begin

with. Neither you, Steven or anyone else for that matter will make a difference, she will be leaving regardless. It would be better for you to focus your energize on the ladies who are marriage inclined."

"I will not settle for the lackadaisical groomed mindless girl. I want an equal not a reed which bends as the wind blows. Nina is strong, independent, intelligent, unyielding and opinionated; she has all of your most admirable qualities and then some. You know that I measure every woman to you."

Ashamed Vanessa looks away

"And she is the first to even come close to the woman I hold on a pedestal, so I hope that you understand why I cannot just stand by."

"I promised her I will be her friend but if she one day feels the need to reciprocate my feelings I will be there in a heartbeat."

"I understand Nicki, I do, as long as you gage her feelings and do not overstep the bounds set before you. But if you don't you will upset her and push her away further."

Hearing Deckly and Nina returning Vanessa concludes the conversation "I am glad that we had this talk, you know my dear that I wish no one more happiness than you. It would make me extremely happy if her love for you kept her here and I could have both of you together with me."

Getting misty eyed she waves her hand as if to swat away the melancholic thought "Enough of that they are rounding the bend."

Walking up the stairs Nina and Decklyn are laughing and deep in conversation.

"I do agree I never thought of it that way" says Decklyn.

"Most people do not we should try and test it one day" she responds.

"Walking over between them Vanessa takes each by the hand "Test what?"

"Ahh...Nina was enlightening me on the limitations of the human mind. She has a test which proves to us that we are unable to grasp infinity."

Stepping up Nicki challenges her "I comprehend infinity."

"No you understand the meaning of the word but your mind can not comprehend the scope of infinity. We should test it on the night of the next new moon, in a week or two. Yes?"

"Yes!" they all say in unison.

With that they decide to go to bed.

"It is late we should retire for the night."

Yawning Nina concurs "Yes I am exhausted."

Walking beside her Nicki asks "Do you have definite plans for tomorrow?"

"I am free for the most part as the children have other obligations and will have no need of me.."

"Would you like to have a tour of the surrounding area? Tomorrow should be a fine day for a ride."

Sheepishly she says "I would like that very much."

With that they all go to their respective chambers.

D,

I practically lost it when he gave me the necklace and then later when he led me away from the dining room. He was very sweet in what he said to me but I don't know how much he is willing to stick to it. Was it just a trick so that I would not seize to see him?

The diner was a huge success, the wine was flowing freely and we are all completely trashed. They are some great people to party with. LOL I wonder if this will make any sense in the morning. I'm sure I will be paying for this tomorrow the good thing is my tolerance will surely rise. LMAO!!!

Tomorrow is another day, night!!

Waking up Nina is expecting a wicked headache to greet her but to her surprise she feels just fine, physically that is. Emotionally it's a completely different story.

She pulls her journal off the side table and reading last nights entry she continues it.

Continued....

Did you know that there are still mornings that I wake up think I'm home and all of this was just a

dream or nightmare (depending on the day). And when I realize that this is my reality and that which I thought was my reality is just a dream I break down completely.

Today is one of those days, last night I got up to go to the bathroom and thought I was in my room, that is until I practically impaled myself on the footboard post. I don't know if it was the pain or the wicked hangover or what but I lost it. My knees buckled and I slumped on the ground weeping uncontrollably, every part of me hurt but mostly my heart. It actually hurt physically the emotional revelation that all that I am doing just might be completely futile. The sheer realization manifested itself into a full on physical pain one like I have never experienced before. This was by far the worst thing I have had to endure since coming here.

These night mares are becoming more frequent and stronger. I don't know if it is because my ties to my past are becoming thinner and thinner and perhaps I'm loosing myself and that is what the pain is. This is something I must discuss with Ephraim; we have to

start our research NOW!!! There is no time left to tarry we must have a plan of action and execution; I don't know how much of this anguish I can go through before it drives me completely mad. I don't know how much I can handle before it splits me in two.

Till morrow.

Feeling a wave of self pity wash over her she breaks down, crawling back into bed burrowing into its folds trying to stifle her cries. Eventually the emotional exhaustion overtakes her and she slips back into a dreamless sleep.

Walking past Nina's door Olivia hears her cry out, shaking her head she walks over to the decorative chair a few doors down, she carries it over to her mistresses door. This will be another one of those days where she will keep watch over the young miss. These bouts of vapors have returned and Olivia is reluctant to mention them to the Douches. It seems such a private pain so primal and heart wrenching. The one day when she tried to speak to Miss Nicolette

about it, she seemed to completely shut down and return to her bed and wept some more.

Since then she has done just as she has today, stand guard to give her the privacy to mourn whatever it is that has affected her so. Once all is still she returns the chair to its rightful place and quietly enters the room to ready it for the day ahead.

Working away she thinks to herself 'I am quite surprised that this has come again and so early in the morn. Usually these attacks are reserved for the night. She has not put herself through this since meeting the Count; he has been the perfect distraction. Well now that it is over I guess I will be spending more time in this chair. I should bring up a more comfortable one.'

Hearing the shuffling of feet and crumple of skirts Nina begins to wake. Embarrassed she avoids eye contact with Olivia, knowing full well that she spent the morning guarding her door to give her privacy.

Getting up she gets herself ready with Olivia's help. As Olivia braids her hair she whispers "I told Her

Grace you were feeling ill, so if she asks you know what to say."

On the verge of tears yet again she just nods knowing full well if she even attempted to speak she would break down once again.

Seeing her face contort in gratitude and pain, Olivia pats her shoulder and says "Enough of that Miss you must put on a brave face and seize what is left of the day." with a shaky voice she continues "You cannot lock yourself in here with all your sorrows. As my mother used to say to me 'Go and get the stink blown off ya' "and she smacks Nina on her behind pushing her toward the door.

The old phrase brings back memories and a smile slowly crawls upon her face. With that she exits the room and begins her descent down the stairs.

Composing herself she walks into the dining room in time to join the family for brunch.

Nicki gets up and pulls the chair out for her, as she sits they exchange pleasantries.

"Are you feeling well enough to take that ride Nina?" says Nicki in a concerned tone.

"Oh yes though I am saddened that we will have to shorten it as we have lost most of the morning."

"Nonsense we have plenty of time to see everything" smiling sheepishly he continues "there is always tomorrow."

"Yes there is always tomorrow."

Finishing up their breakfast Nicki takes Nina by the hand and escorts her to the foyer and out the front door. There is a beautiful open top carriage waiting for them.

"It is not as grand as the coach we took to the Doctors dinner but this one is perfect for the weather we are having."

Taking the parasol that Olivia has brought out for her she sits herself next to Nicki and they are off. It is a perfect spring day the birds are chirping happily, the flowers are in bloom, their soft fragrant scents wafting into the air as they pass them by. After quite some time she notices that the Crescentferd manor is

quite secluded there are no other properties for miles around.

"Declyn owns quite of bit of property surrounding Crescentferd, does he not?"

"Yes he does the property has been in the family for centuries. His great, great, great grandfather was in a bit of a bind long ago and was forced to dispose of much of the land. Thankfully he was lucky enough to be able to buy back a large portion, to this day Declyn is trying to bring the estate back to its former glory."

"Who are their neighbors?"

"There are quite a few families surrounding the property, there are the McDougal's to the north, Davenports to the south, Leighton's on the east and Ashford's to the west.

"Hearing you speak of this I realize that I know very little of you. Other than what Vanessa has told me over the years and what the servants have whispered about you."

With a hearty laugh he shakes his head "Well then you must have heard quite an ear full, I don't know if you need to hear anything else from me."

"On the contrary I rather hear it from the horse's mouth as they say."

"Horse hmm... well what would you like to know?"

"I do not know" contemplating she continues "tell me about you, not the Count. Do you come from a large family, will they be coming for the season?"

"At one time I had a large family two brothers and two sisters. But some of the children were too weak to survive past a few months. My younger sister and one older brother passed away a few months after they were born. My twin brother passed on from scarlet fever when I was five years old. For quite some time my mother decided not to have any more children and then she had Scarlet my only sibling. She is a few years younger than I, married and has a son and a daughter who are close in age with Josephine and Tristan."

"I am sorry to hear that, I can't imagine what your poor mother must have gone through."

"She is the strongest woman I know, though you wouldn't think it looking at her."

"Woman's strength comes from within, we aren't as showy as you men." she says patting his obviously well developed biceps.

Laughing he concurs "Yes!"

My family has much property all over Europe, one property is here in the outskirts of London. Though when I am in London most of the time I stay with the Wakefield's."

With a laugh he continues "I dare not deprive the wait staff nor Decklyn of my presence."

"I dare say they would be devastated if you did." she barely gets out through her laughter.

"Would you like to one day go and visit my humble abode?"

"That would be delightful."

"There is one particular ball which takes place quite close, perhaps I will have them ready the property for us and I will play host instead of Vanessa."

"Excellent idea."

The conversation takes a lull as Nina is engrossed in her surroundings. Nicki perches the coach on the hill overlooking the small village.

Nina is entranced "This is stunning! So picturesque, breathtaking it looks so surreal, a painter could not have imagined a more perfect place."

The town is nestled between four towering hills covered with what appear to be tiny flowers. The sun at its peak floods the valley with a soft light, the sky is crystal blue with white puffs of clouds sprinkled for what appears to be purely decorative reasons.

Letting her take it all in Nicki observes her reaction.

"Shall we continue on?"

"Oh.. Yes please."

Off they go down the hill Nicki masterfully handling the horses.

'Looks like he is showing off a bit' she laughs to herself internally. 'Boys and their toys!!'

Weaving in and out of carriage traffic Nicki stops the horses in front of a barn like structure. 'Modern day parking garage.'

The handlers come out and take the reins of the horses and Nicki escorts Nina out. Walking side by side he points out the few important places and gives her a bit of history behind them.

Everyone they pass smiles and address Nicki and give Nina a curious glance. When they would come upon one of his acquaintances Nicki would stop and introduce her more intimately than she would prefer.

Coming to a quaint little shop Nicki says" I wager you would like it in here come lets go in"

He gives her his hand as she gathers her skirts to walk up the steep stairs. Unexpectedly he places his hand on the small of her back, exuding just enough pressure to make her catch her breath. Knowing full well that he is waiting for her reaction she does not

give him the satisfaction, she walks in head held high.

As the bell above the door chimes in their presence a familiar face pops out of the back.

"Sacré bleu! Nicolette, mon cheré how wonderful it is to see you, what a pleasant surprise. Merci, Nicki for bringing her. Is everything all right with the dresses? Oh let me see you in this lively creation." Nina twirls before the seamstress.

"If I had painted it on you I could not have done a better job. Oh enough boasting what brings you by my dear?"

"Nicki apparently, he's giving me a tour of the village.

Surprised Nina continues "I would have thought you would be situated in London not a wee village like this."

"Ah...Yes, well London is just too much hustle and bustle. Too competitive and truly stifling, I prefer the open sky and fresh air. Nature is my muse and I dare not let her go just for an extra pound in my pocket."

"No argument here."

"If you do not mind Count I will steal her away."

"Be my guest, I will find a way to amuse myself somehow."

Speculatively she eye's him "Mmmhmmmm... Yes well just mind your matters, or this will be the last time you are allowed into my shop un-chaperoned.

With a laugh and a nod of his head he concedes.

Evangeline gives Nina a tour of the shop showing her some of the unfinished pieces and those on display. Taking her to the back room 'where all the magic happens' they leave Nicki to his own devices.

The back room is covered from floor to ceiling with the widest array of fabrics and colors Nina has ever seen. Hanging from the ceiling and littered over the sowing tables are dresses in all stages of assemblement.

'The fashion district can't compete with this' she thinks to herself in wonderment.

"This is a dream! My goodness you have quite the array here."

"Not too many patrons are lucky enough to see this, consider yourself privileged my dear."

"I do. Last time we met you said you have some screeches you would like for me to see."

"Ah... Impatience is not a virtue my dear." she says wagging her finger at Nina, she continues "Yes I do but they are not ready just yet. Perhaps in a few days you can come on your own now that you know where my shop is."

"Oh you are wicked for making me wait."

"That is enough for now; let us see what kind of trouble the Count has gotten himself being left all alone for so long."

Coming out from behind the curtain they see him place a parcel in his coat pocket. Seeing them emerge he is like a deer caught in headlights but recovers quickly. He thanks the sales maid a bit more enthusiastically with that disarming grin of his. The poor girl is left memorized, coming too she sees

Evangeline and Nina watching and a flush begins to spread across her face. She excused herself and runs out the door.

"Nicki you know that thing is a weapon you should think twice before you unleash it on some poor unsuspecting girl."

"Well apparently it is not that effective" he says starring back at Nina.

"We should go; Evangeline has to get back to work by looks of it back there. Thank you for showing me about, I shall see you soon."

"Goodbye to both of you."

Closing the door behind them she eyes Nicki's bulging pocket containing the parcel.

"What are you up to Nicki?" she whispers to herself turning back to the sales desk she looks for the receipt of the purchase.

Finding it she shakes her head "Looks as if he is not taking no for an answer."

As they walkout of the store Nicki and Nina turn back toward the stables.

"I would show you more of the village but it is getting late we should begin out trip home. And I thought you would like to see the sun set on the valley, it truly is an amazing sight."

"That would be delightful."

Nicki asks the stable boy for the coach and he helps Nina up. The night is getting a bit chilly so she wraps the scarf Olivia gave her about her shoulders. Seeing her shudder Nicki moves closer to discreetly share his body heat with her.

This does not escape Nina's attention but she is too cold to care and so she moves closer still.

"It is quite chilly tonight, is this usual for this time of year?" She asks trying to keep her teeth from chattering.

"It is England there is nothing usual here" he chuckles. "Though I do find it most unusual for the temperature to change so drastically, there must be a cold front coming in from the north."

Seeing she is now much more noticeably shivering he says "come closer you chit there is no reason for you to be freezing when I'm here." Not waiting for her to reject his offer he wraps his right arm about her and pulls her in closer. Opening his jacket he wraps her in it letting her burrow in its warmth.

Feeling the desperately needed warmth she dare not protest.

'Mmmm... he smells good. Stop it!!! You can not think of him like that... What I'm just stating a fact, can't I just do that?...NO!!!'

She looks up at him her face so close to his, he notices her spying him and he smiles. His heartbeat accelerates, and that is something that Nina does notice. Snapping out of the sweet fantasy she afforded herself, she pulls away and moves back to her side of the coach.

"Thank you, I feel much better now. We are close are we not?"

"Yes, we are not too long now. I am sorry that we missed the sunset, there is always next time?"

"Yes, next time." She smiles weakly, as they round the bend she sees the lights of Crescentferd and she lets out a louder than intended sigh of relief.

Hearing her sigh Nicki wrinkles his brow in confusion.

"Did you enjoy yourself today?"

"Of course it was a splendid day. I am glad that my coming down late did not deter us from our original plan. Thank you for showing me around."

"It was my pleasure."

As they pull up to the mansion Nina can not wait to get out, the footman pulls down the step and the foot stool. Without waiting for Nicki to assist her she steps down on her own turns to him and does a small curtsey.

"Thank you for today." And she turns back towards the door and marches upstairs straight to her room.

Nicki is left flabbergasted, his plans for a night cap in ruin and his surprise is still his own. Frustrated he walks in after her but instead finds himself in the

study standing before the bar pouring himself a glass of single malt scotch.

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Chapter 5

At Water's Edge - Chapter 8

Hello everyone, so finally its here, I feel really guilty should have posted parts of this a long time ago. I just wanted to give you a full chapter so i held off. If you were wondering this is not even half of the chapter, there is soooo... much good stuff to come. For months now i have been trying to write the last 2 pages, but of course those 2 pages ballooned to 10, so finishing it has not been as easy as i had originally imagined, in any case here it is PART I of Chapter 8. I am editing the rest of it and I hope to have it up tomorrow.

Please vote and comment, it really helps motivate and inspire me to finish this monster.

Sweet Dreams!!!

JoJo :)

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Waking she is dressed and ready in record time and she descends the stairs to join the family for breakfast.

No one is inquiring of the prior days outing as it is obvious that Nicki is not in the best of spirits. For the fear that anything said will aggravate the already testy situation, all quietly eat their meal.

Nina notices Declyn getting ready to speak with a mischievous smile on his face. She catches Vanessa's eye and nods toward Declyn, getting the hint Vanessa interjects before her husband makes an unwitting comment.

"Nina what are your plans for today? I hope you will begin teaching the children again?" she says but her eyes convey a completely different message to which Nina concedes to.

'Yes we will speak of last night right after breakfast' s*he thinks to herself.*

Declyn second attempt to torture the withdrawn Nicki is stopped by his wife's icy glare and the devious smirk is whipped off of his face.

Nicki is still not participating in the light conversation, which is creating quite an uncomfortable atmosphere for all. All but the children who are oblivious to the obvious tension.

"Nicki, will you take me for a ride today, you haven't played with us since you got here." Josephine pouts "Please" she pleads not waiting for him to have a chance to reject her.

Nicki finally looks up from his plate, slightly confused and glassy eyed "I... yes of course, forgive me my dear. I will be at your service for the remainder of my stay" he facetiously waves his hand in a mock bow "however brief it might be".

A movement out if the corner of his eye catches his attention, turning his head in its general direction he glances at Nina and for a split second manages to catch her eye, as he does he quickly looks back down to his plate.

He smiles and miraculously his manner changes.

Looking over to Nina again "I hope the trip yesterday wasn't too tiring for you. You were in such a rush to

get to your rooms" he says with a slight smile on his lips.

Vanessa regards him with more scrutiny than Nina and sees a bit of pain flash across his face as he almost whispers the words.

Shocked by his brighter disposition and his intensity Nina is not quick enough to hide her surprise.

"Umm ... yes I was cold and tired; I just wanted to curl up in my warm bed as soon as I could. I hope you did not take offence to it, I did enjoy myself immensely. Thank you again."

"You are more than welcome, I am glad that you enjoyed yourself perhaps we can go and explore some other areas, when the weather and your schedule permit of course."

Regaining her composure Nina smiles and nods her head in agreement.

'He seems pleasant enough, perhaps he was contemplating something else and his previous disposition has nothing to do with last night' *giving a mental shrug 'One can only hope.'*

Vanessa jumps in the conversation "Nina your schedule will be too demanding to even entertain the idea."

Declyn no longer able to contain himself decides to strike at Nicki while the iron is hot "Sounds like your only alone time will be if you can get yourself on her dance card. As I hear it those young fauns are just itching to steal her away. Old chap, you will have quite a bit of competition I hope you are up to it!!"

Not even attempting to hide his distaste Nicki sneers at Declyn "Hmm... yes well some men enjoy a challenge, unlike others for whom things just fall so easily into place. Some of us prefer to put in an effort" he continues as he stands to takes his leave.

Nina reaches over for Nicki's hand which is still braced on the table.

"I am sorry..." she begins. Nicki interrupts pulling his hand away and continues "no need for you to apologize, this has nothing to do with you."

He reaches for her cheek but changes his mind in the last moment and pulls his hand back; he turns and leaves the room.

As her does Vanessa turns towards her husband exclaiming in anger "Declyn!!"

"I was just ..."

"Yes, I am well aware of what you were just, as do you... ughhh!" she gets up to leave.

Nina closes her eyes and deeply sighs as tears brim her lashes. Vanessa comes around and helps her up, as they walk out Vanessa gives Declyn a look of disappointment.

Leaving the children with the nanny they walk to The Duchesses room settling by the fire place Vanessa begins "What ever happened last night?"

"Nothing that I could imagine that would insight such a reaction." Nina continues telling her everything.

"Yes I don't see what it could possibly be. Is that all?" she eyes her with more scrutiny.

Holding up her hands defensively "Yes I swear."

"If it is I do not think his behavior today had anything to do with the prior day's events. Well whatever it is I am glad it has nothing to do with you. Now my dear what are your plans? If you really wish to search for a way home, I suggest you begin as soon as possible. Before long you will not have time to dedicate to it as the seasons festivities will take up your every waking moment. And I insist that you experience everything as I have a dreadful feeling you will be leaving me soon."

Getting up she gives her ward a hug and finishes her sentence internally 'One way or another.'

"Yes well I was hoping to speak to Nathaniel today to see how to approach this. Perhaps I can take a ride out there."

Just as Vanessa is about to protest Nina continues "With Thian as my escort, it will give him a chance to continue the long overdue riding lessons and me to bestow some of my knowledge on to him. He deserves some more advances lessons which would be far beyond Josephine's comprehension."

“Perfect! Go and get ready and I will tell Thian. While Nicki is entertaining Josephine you can sneak away.”

Nina gets up and leaves to get ready.

Walking down the stairs Nina finds Thian waiting for her excitedly at the bottom of the stairs, as she reaches him he gives her the crook of her arm.

Nina smiles at him and they are off out the main door.

“I took the liberty to ready your steed.”

“Thank you, how very thoughtful of you.”

As they leisurely ride, Thian sporadically corrects some of her riding missteps. Once she has ridden for some time to his satisfaction, he spurs his horse into a full gallop and prompts her to race with him.

Laughing from the sheer joy of an exhilarating ride both eventually slow their horses and return to a much slower pace.

"That was wonderful!!" Nina exclaims.

"Really gets your blood pumping. You have improved tenfold since you last rode with me. Did Nicki teach you as well?"

"No he did not; you are a very thorough teacher thanks to your tutelage I have excelled as I have."

Blushing Thian shakes his head and sheepishly replies "No, you are just a wonderful student."

"In turn I have not been such a great teacher. Now that it is just the two of us tell me what you would like for me to teach you? What I discuss when Josephine is in tow, is obviously not benefiting you very much. I asked your mother to let us come alone so that I can give you some personal attention."

"Thank you, I am quite fascinated with the science you were discussing."

And so Nina indulges the boys curiosities, without even realizing it they find themselves at the gates to the Doctors Manor.

"It looks so different in daylight. It really is a beautiful property." Squinting in the sun she sees someone on the front stairs, upon realizing it's the Doctor she waves.

Nina and Thian hand their horses over to the stable hand and the Doctor embraces each and escorts them

into the house. As they settle in Gerard brings in their refreshments, comfortably seated and with all the usual pleasantries exchanged the doctor gets down to business.

"So my dear what do I owe this great pleasure to?"

"Well I thought that it is time to have a discussion with Ephraim and familiarize him in the eccentricities of my pending predicament."

"Yes I agree" with that he signals to Gerard who brings over a quill and stationary. The Doctor jots down a few lines and embosses it with his wax seal. Turning to the butler he instructs him "Have this delivered to Mr. Scott and only place it in his hands. This is not to be handled by anyone else."

"Yes Sir." He curtly answers, turns and walks to the door. As he opens it a commotion is heard coming from the hall.

A young boy runs in, Gerard braces himself against the wall as the boy races past him and proceeds to evade the footmen who have rushed in after him. The footmen realizing they have entered without being

asked in begin apologizing for the interruption and explain how the boy came to be in their presence.

The boy no older that Thian is now at the doctors feet panting and speaking in gulps which no one understands.

"Doctor... you... must... come! My...sister... please... she needs...you."

Concerned the Doctor asks "Who are you my boy and who is your sister?"

Seeing that the doctor is in no immediate danger the footmen excuses themselves and the boy continues on.

"I am Lord Jacob Dartmouth my sister Lady Fiona Dartmouth is rather ill and has been for quite some time. She is convinced the family physician which our Aunt Contessa Gertrude Parrish brought to tend to her, is making her worse. She sent me here to beseech you to come to her aid, please doctor you must, she is all that I have!"

"Of course, my bag please" he signals to the butler.

Turning to Nina he says "They have been orphaned and are wards of their Aunt. His sister is a wisp of a girl. I do remember her being rather sweet."

Grabbing his bag he stands saying "Shall we?"

"You wish for me to come with you?"

"Nina I would like" catching himself he rephrases "nay... I need you and Thian to accompany me. Knowing the Contessa as I do, I will need quite a distraction if I am to examine the girl."

"Thian my boy you will have firsthand experience at what it means to be a doctor" he says as he playfully ruffles the boy's hair.

As all settle into the Doctors coach, he turns to Jacob "What is it that plagues your sister?"

"We do not know Sir, she is weak and always tired. It seems she is getting weaker by the day. She is exceptionally worse on the days the doctor comes to give her treatment."

"And what treatment does she receive?"

"He bleeds her."

“Bleeds!! Who bleeds people!! For what??” Nina is beside herself, fired up after finding out that the poor girl is subject to such a barbaric practice moreover, one which yields no results.

“Calm down Nicolette, perhaps there is a reason for the treatment.”

“There is no good reason for it.” Nina whispers to the Doctor not wanting to alarm the children.

As they pull up to a stunning manor footmen open the doors and lower the steps. Nina is first to exit, Jacob right behind her manages to overtake her and goes on leading the way as the doctor and Thian flank Nina on each side.

Taking her elbow the Doctor whispers “Do try to control yourself my dear, the Contessa is a stickler for the old ways, when women were seen not heard. We do not what to offend her as then we will be of no use to the girl. Perhaps a more diplomatic course would yield better results.”

Smirking Nina replies “I cannot promise anything but I will try.”

Entering the manor the servants bow to the young master.

“Where is Lady Fiona?” he asks.

“She is receiving her treatment from the Doctor, she has befallen ill due to yet another episode.”

Turning to his party he frantically says “We must hurry, follow me!”

Running up the stairs they follow him, throwing caution to the wind Nina lifts up her skirts and runs ahead with Jacob.

Entering the chamber she is stunned as it reeks of a metallic stench which has permeated the air, leaving a bad taste in her mouth. Running her tongue along her teeth she turns to Jacob who has already hurried to his sister’s side.

“I have brought help as you asked dear sister.” He whispers into her ear, as she is visibly slipping in and out of consciousness barely acknowledging his presence.

Troubled Nina steps forward towards the girl only to be held back by the Doctor.

Stepping past her The Doctor walks over to the elderly woman in the room, he bows before her taking the outstretched hand and kissing it gently.

"Doctor Whittleton what a surprise! To what is it that I owe this great pleasure to?"

"Well it has come to my attention that your young ward had befallen ill and I am here to assist in any way that I can."

"And how is it that you come to learn of this?" she says suspiciously glancing at the young Lord.

Just as she is about to continue her questioning Nina steps up and introduces herself, giving the Doctor a chance to check on the young Miss.

"Your Ladyship it appears that the Doctor has forgotten his matters. I am Miss Nicolette Martin and this is the young Lord Wakefield."

"The Dukes own son, well step up my dear boy I have not seen you in ages. You have grown up to be a fine

young man, and how is your dear grandmother? I have not seen the Dowager in quite some time. I had hoped to organize the first ball of the season to acquaint my dear Fiona with the London society but it appears that she will not be participating this season."

"Thank you Contessa, my grandmother is quite well and I am sure with the Doctors and Miss Martins help Lady Fiona will be in finer spirits sooner than expected and be present at the opening gala."

Turning to Nicolette with a perplexed expression "Miss Martin, what could a woman possibly know of the healing arts" looking her up and down as to evaluate her intelligence by looks.

Exasperated by the mere thought of her young ward she exclaims dramatically "I am afraid all is lost, if my doctors cannot do anything for her, no one can."

Miffed Nina ignores the Contessa belittling comment and wanders over to the Doctor to see what he has assessed the girl's condition to be. As she gets closer the air is far more pungent and she sees a basin on the floor still being filled with the young girl's blood.

“Hello” she says softly bringing the girl too.

Opening her eyes Fiona smiles weakly “Hello, who are you? Where is Doctor Wittleton?”

“I am Nina and I am here to help you. The doctor has examined you and is confirming his assessment with your Aunts physician. While the Doctor is distracting them both I thought to come here and ask you a few questions, if that is alright with you?”

“Of course please ask anything.”

“Can you tell me how you feel; are you weak, easily fatigued, have a loss of energy, any dizziness, shortness of breath and headache, particularly when you are active?”

“Yes to all and sometimes I have horrible pains in my legs and hands.”

“And what do they feel like? Pins and needles? Do you ever have a loss of your sense of touch?"

“Yes like ants are crawling on my extremities, when it happens my fingertips go numb and I sometimes cannot feel the bottoms of my feet.

"Any clumsiness and stiffness of the arms and legs?"

Nodding her head Fiona answers "My heart races for no apparent reason and I feel very light headed, several times I have fainted due to it. Since then my aunt has refused to let me out of my bed and her physician bleeds me regularly when I have one of my spells." Saying so she lifts her arm for Nina to see the needle and tube which is slowly dripping the blood into the basin below.

Appalled Nina pulls the needle out holding pressure over the puncture wound to stop the bleeding.

She tosses the tube into the basin with a clang, which brings the Countess's physician attention to her.

He marches over "What do you think you are doing?" he says grabbing her by the arm.

"I am trying to help her and under no circumstances is bleeding her going to rectify the situation."

"Who is this, are you a doctor? You have no right!! Contessa please have this hysterical woman escorted out of my presence for interfering with my treatment."

The Doctor interjects "Please Sir!"

Turning to the Contessa he continues "She is here to assist me in my diagnosis. Please we are all here to do what is best for Lady Fiona, what harm will come of it if she tells us what her diagnosis is."

"I will not tolerate such insubordination; imagine a woman knowing anything about the medical profession" exclaims the physician.

Seeing the pleading in the eyes of both of her wards, the Contessa concedes. "All right, I will allow it…" Her physician attempts to interject but the old woman raises her hand and silences him.

"I am intrigued to hear what she has to say, go on my dear."

"I believe that the Lady Fiona suffers from something called anemia. Which type of anemia I cannot determine without extensive blood work, which I would not be able to perform. Nor can I determine the severity of the situation, it is possible that she could have a rather mild form of which can be rectified by a change to her diet. Or it can be a severe form of

anemia which will require a more aggressive form of treatment. In any case I am certain that bleeding her only exasperated her condition and that is why she is weaker after every 'treatment session'."

"Anemia how is it that you came to such a conclusion, Miss Nicolette?" asks the Doctor.

"Well I asked her to recount her symptoms, and she has weakness, fatigue, and general run-down feeling. Her skin is pasty and sallow, if you would examine her gums you will see that they are pale, as are her nail beds. Her eyelid lining if you see here is also very pale compare to someone who is not anemic, if you would compare it to my own."

"What treatment do you propose?" asks the Doctor with a confident smirk upon his face.

"Well I believe we should try to increase the amount of vitamin B-12 in her diet. Good dietary sources of vitamin B-12 are meat, liver, and kidney; fish, oyster, and clams; and milk, cheese and eggs. If this does not help reverse the symptoms we may have to plan a more aggressive treatment."

“Contessa I agree with Miss Martin’s deduction and course of treatment. I do believe that Lady Fiona will make a complete recovery if this course of treatment is taken and…” looking over to the other doctor “no more bleeding, it will only slow down our treatment.”

“Please Aunty, please.” Beg Jacob and Fiona.

“All right, Doctor we will do what you propose, Lady Fiona will be in your care. I wish to see progress in a month’s time, I do not wish to see my ward bedridden for this season, do we have an understanding?”

“Yes we do your Ladyship, you are most magnanimous.” He says bowing before her, as she passes by him.

Only the Doctor, Nina, Jacob, Fiona and Thian are left. Nina walks over to Fiona “I do hope this will be enough to free you of this gilded cage."

"As do I, I will do anything to be able to live a normal life again. My poor aunt is in such fear that anything would happen to me that she does not allow me to do anything which she deems will exasperate my

condition. I have felt like a prisoner in my own home for so long."

Patting the girls hand Nina rises and gives the fragile girl a hug. "We must go now my dear, but I will come in a forth night to check up on your recovery. If anything changes do not hesitate to contact myself or the Doctor, I am determined to be in your company for the first ball and if I am not mistaken it is almost upon us."

With a promises from both that the recuperation regiment will be followed to the letter satisfied Nina, Thian and the Doctor take their leave.

"Well that certainly sounds like an interesting day, love" says Vanessa as Thian recounts his outing with Nina at the dinner table.

"Yes quite who would have thought that the Doctor would have asked us to come with him. I was ready to leave when he insisted. Fiona is a sweet girl I hope that the diagnosis is correct and she makes a full recovery."

"We all do my dear, I faintly remember her parents, such nice people, very open and kind. I do believe Lady Fiona takes much after her late mother; she was a slight woman with an amazing ability to make one feel so warm and comfortable. She was like a warm blanket on a cold winter's day" smiles Vanessa.

As their conversation continues there is a knock at the door.

"Enter, please" says Declyn.

Bowing a footman opens the door "Your Lordship, there is a Doctor Whittleton and Mr. Ephraim Scott for Miss Martin."

"Well show them in, they may join us if they wish."

"Oh Goodness I did not expect them to come so soon."

Entering both men bow and exchange greetings.

"What brings you here Nathaniel?" asks Declyn perplexed that they would be arriving at such a late hour.

"Ephraim and I have some business to discuss with Nicolette."

"What business could that be?" he asks perplexed.

Vanessa walks over to her husband "Come dear let us give them some privacy. We shall be in the library, once you have finished please come and join us" Vanessa ends with a smile.

A protesting and confused Declyn is silences by his wife's stern stare "you owe me for embarrassing me this morn" she whispers as she pulls him out of the room.

Flustered and surprised Nina turns back to her guests "Nathaniel I did not expect you to bring Ephraim so soon!"

"Well I thought that sooner would be better than later. As you said what you need him to witness is best on the night of a full moon."

Turning towards the window she sees the milky full face of the moon astonished she turns back to her guests.

"Already! My goodness, I cannot believe so much time has passed since my coming here."

Turning to the poor scientist still perplexed she smiles sheepishly "Ephraim, may I call you that?"

"Yes of course, if we are to work closely it is best to disregard formalities" he smiles.

"Excellent, well let us go then, away for prying eyes and curious ears so that was may speak freely and candidly so that you may understand me best."

As they walk out to the grounds with lanterns in hand, Declyn spies them for the library window.

"What on earth?" he whispers.

"Come away from there darling, come and sit beside me" says Vanessa nervously patting the seat beside her.

"Vanessa, what are Whittleton and Mr. Scott here for? What business could they possibly have with her?"

For the fear of having him question her further she answers him fervently "Why my dear husband nothing that you need to concern yourself with."

He turns towards Vanessa looks at her sweet innocent face and then turns back whispering under his breath

“This is my home everything and everyone in it concerns me.”

Approaching the tree Nina comes to the end of her story. And so you see Ephraim what I need you for. I need you to help me find my way home.” Patting the tree she says “this is my door, I just need you to help me find the key.”

Confused, bemused and totally bewildered Ephraim is speechless, finally finding his words he turns towards the Doctor.

“Is this true?... Do you believe this?... How…But…I…?”

“Yes it is and I do, you yourself sensed the anomaly, sleep on it Ephraim and think about it. Nina will be here to help you, luckily she is a learned woman well versed in the physical theories of her time. Though she will not be able to work out the formulations, she can help with the theories, as I see it that is half the battle.”

“Yes, I do think I will sleep on it, that is quite a story Miss, if it is true.”

“I swear to you on all that I hold dear that it is. Please think about it and let me know of your decision. I am

adamant to start as soon as possible. I have wasted much time."

With that they walk towards the mansion and Nina escorts them to their horses.

"Thank you for everything tonight both of you and Ephraim I look forward to working with you."

D,

I have laid all my cards out on the table. Now it is up to fate. I do hope he decides to take me up on my offer. I did not realize how much time I have wasted until I found myself under that tree once more.

My poor family they must be sick with worry and I am here planning balls and parties, oh I have been so selfish. As soon as he agrees we will be going full steam ahead nothing will stop us now, I have a good feeling about this we will find a way and I will be hone once again.

Home where I belong!

With her eyes full of tears she drifts of into a peaceful slumber for the first time, in what seems like ages to

her and Olivia who still keeps watch outside her young miss's door.

As a new Day dawns Nina jumps out of bed ready to face whatever may come her way.

Eating breakfast with the family, playing and teaching the children, readying herself for bed it all goes by in a flash that is until she sees the letter on her desk. She runs forth and opens it.

Dear Miss. Nicolette,

It is with great pleasure that I inform you that I will begin my research as discussed. I look forward to working with you.

Best Regards,

Ephraim

Olivia walks in "Well aren't we chipper this morn."

"I received some marvelous news; Mr. Scott agreed to assist me in my venture."

"You must be much relieved Miss; I know you have been waiting for his word."

“Oh that I am” she says as she grabs Olivia by both hands and they spin round the room, Olivia screeching and Nina giggling like a school girl. Letting go Olivia braces herself against the writing desk, her hand on a second letter which Nina overlooked in her all consuming excitement.

“Miss there is another letter.”

“What?! Hmm… who can that be from?” Nina musses as she crosses the room and takes it from Olivia’s outstretched hand. She breaks the seal and reads it.

“It’s from Evangeline; she will send a coach for me tomorrow. She wishes my consult on a few of her pieces which she is working on.”

“Well it looks like your schedule is filling right up. I will ready your clothes for tomorrow. Keep in mind that her Ladyship will also wish for you to begin your dance lessons. The season will be upon us sooner than you think.”

“Yes I agree.”

The following day Nina eats her breakfast quickly in anticipation of the coach that is to come. There is a

knock at the door; a foot man comes in to announce that Nina's transportation has arrived. She jumps up says her goodbyes and is off.

Opening the door to Evangeline's shop, the bell dings above her head bringing back memories of the last time she was at the establishment.

"Mon Chère! You are here, tre bien, we have our work cut out for us. There is much to be done" grabbing Nina's face in her hands and squeezing her cheeks as she continues "but you and the young Miss are my priority."

"Whatever are you talking about?"

"Do not be so coy? Wait you do not know?"

Nina shakes her head.

"Well I am sure you will receive word by tonight. Lady Fiona is doing so well, thanks to you" she says nudging Nina "that her aunt has decided to have a gathering as an interlude before the season begins."

"Fiona is doing that well! Oh I am so glad to hear that" Nina chirps excitedly.

“The Contessa has commissioned me to design a spectacular gown for you in the short time. I wished for you to come and see if the one I designed for Lady Fiona is appropriate and I wished for you to see the one I designed for you.” Leading her to her private office Nina is stunned at what she finds. Two beautiful gowns one of pale yellow the other a sweet lavender.

“The yellow is for Lady Fiona, in case you were wondering.”

“Oh I agree, it is like the rebirth of the sun at dawn all pale and sweet, slow and sensual yet pure” she is awed by the multi tiered creation.

“And this is for you, do you like it?” without allowing her to answer she continues.

“Of course we will make whatever changes you suggest on both gowns. So tell me now what you think.

Smiling Nina walks over to the gowns “I think they are divine.”

“Don’t you dare chère; I can see your mind working out the adjustments and changes so you best spilt them out now.”

Laughing “Well if you are forcing me to make alterations to perfection I have to say I am shocked.”

“Oh you …”Evangeline swats at her and they are well on their way to making the changes first on the designs then with the assistance of the seamstresses they begin working on the dresses.

“I think you have out done yourself Nina, I did not think you could improve on my designs but you have exceeded even my expectations. You have quite a gift one that I will gladly take advantage of as long as you allow me to” she says with a smirk.

Bowing Nina puts her hand over her heart “Your praises are more than I deserve, this has been a wonderful distraction, which was much needed. But alas I must bid you farewell as I wish to visit Lady Fiona and congratulate her on her swift recuperation.”

“Yes of course and my driver he will be at your disposal. Give her my best regards to Fiona and tell her I will see her tomorrow for her final fitting.”

“I will and thank you for the use of your coach.”

“My pleasure mon chère and I shall see you for your fitting in two days, till then chère au revoir.”

Walking out of the shop Nina instructs the driver to take her to her next destination.

Arriving at the door of Lady Fiona’s mansion she is greeted by a jubilant Jacob.

“Grandmother, Fiona, Miss Martin her come for a visit!” he shouts.

“Hush you will wake the dead yelling like that!” she says trying to quiet the boy.

Grasping him in a tight hug she continues “I have come to see how Fiona is fairing, I have heard that she has recovered tenfold in such a short time.”

Grabbing her by the hand he pulls her into the mansion as they enter she sees Fiona gingerly descending the staircase.

“Nicolette!” she exclaims excitedly, as he reaches the landing she hurries over to Nina clasps her hands “My savior, if it was not for you I would still be bed ridden, wasting my life away. You are a God sent!”

“What is all this commotion?” the Contessa questions as she enters the foyer.

Seeing Jacob and Fiona standing with Nina she walks towards them and opens her arms up and hugs the already overwhelmed Nina.

Holding her tight she says softly “You are an angel our guardian angel, savior of our poor Fiona. Wherever would we be if it was not for you?” she grabs her tight once again and pulls her into her massive bosom. Nina laughs at the un-expectant act from the prim and proper Contessa.

Nina laughs “I am sure that the Doctor would have made the same determination which helped your ward get well without my assistance.”

“Regardless you are our savior and in lieu of that I will be having a s mall gathering in your honor at the end of the week. To further show my gratitude I have

commissioned Madame Evangeline to create for you a spectacular gown."

Escaping from the Countesses' surprisingly firm grasp with her hand upon her breast Nina retorts "The greatest gift to me is that Fiona has made such a swift recovery. Nothing makes me happier than to see her up and about."

"Yes well, regardless you are to attend as the guest of honor" she says looking sternly at Nicolette.

"Thank you, your Grace" Nina curtsies as the Contessa takes her leave.

Taking her guest by the arm Fiona whispers "And by a small gathering she means at least two hundred in attendance, everyone other than the Queen and court. Though if auntie had her way they would surely be there as well" she ends with a chuckle.

"Oh for heaven's sake!" exhales Nicolette "Well then I best be off, there is much I must do before that day.

"Laying a kiss upon still frail girls' cheek she bids them a farewell as her coach pulls away.

After dismounting from the coach she thanks the driver and sends her best regards to Evangeline. Turning towards the stairs she is greeted by a rather eager Vanessa.

"You have received your first invitation of the season from the Contessa Parrish and you are the guest of honor. After this you will surely be invited to every ball and gathering that there is, this will be such a glorious season."

Vanessa prattles on as Nina climbs up the stairs finally landing in Vanessa's outstretched arms. After an exuberant hug Vanessa holds her at arm's length, "we must begin you lessons at once. Oh goodness we should have begun them sooner! Wherever is Nicky we need him now more than ever."

"Do not fret all will be well."

At the sound of hooves in full gallop both turn towards the gates.

"It is Mr. Scott" waves Nina.

"I will see to what he needs and you do what is necessary so that I can begin my much needed

lessons." With that Vanessa retreats into the house and Nina expectantly waits whilst Ephraim dismounts and leaps two steps at a time to reach her.

Bowing before her he grins "Good day Miss Nina!"

"Good day, you are quite jubilant today."

"Yes well I have been working all night and wish to ask you for permission for access to the grounds in order to be able to put some theories to the test and do some additional experimenting."

"Of course anything you need."

"If it goes well we will be well on our way to getting you home Miss."

"From your mouth to Gods ears."

"She walks Mr. Scott through the mansion and out to the back. In the process they discuss some of his theories and findings. His depth and understanding making Nina hopeful for the first time at her chance of making her way home. Leaving Ephraim at the tree she happily skips her way home, not remembering when she last skipped anywhere for any reason at all.

Josephine waits for her by the terrace doors.

“Mama asks that you join us in the east wing for your lessons.”

Taking Nina by the hand Josephine leads the way,

D,

I am sorry I have not written sooner, I have been swamped, overwhelmed and exhausted. Between the dance lessons, exhausting late nights with Ephraim by the tree and the nervous expectations of my reunion with Nicky I collapse upon my bed each night before I can put pen to paper.

Thank God I am a fast learner when it comes to remembering choreography. My only hope is that my partner dances as well as Declyn who has been my sparring partner. LOL His poor toes, but we have had quite a few laughs as well, though I do see him eyeing me suspiciously. I told Vanessa that we should tell him, but she insists the less he knows the better. She has admitted to me that he has as of late begun to ask questions. I don’t like her lying on my

behalf but I do think she gets a kick out of having a secret of her own to torture him with.

The dress Evangeline made is gorgeous though I asked her to tone it down so it doesn't overshadow that of Fiona. I decided to play down my hair and makeup in order to let her shine. Though truth be told the girl needs no help from me, she is glowing and radiant a gorgeous butterfly has emerged for the sad little caterpillar of a girl I knew not too long ago.

Ephraim has been doing a great job though I try to keep up with the formulas and more in-depth theories are well beyond my level of comprehension. I feel bad him hallways having to teach and explain. He says it's helpful to him if he can bounce ideas off me and confirm his theories, whilst I think I just slow him down. He says he will start experimenting soon enough and see what they can gather from that. I don't know how much and of this will help in the end but it feels good to be proactive even if in the end it doesn't yield the results I need.

As for Nicki I have heard very little from him since that faithful morn, Vanessa says he received the letter

and even though he has not responded she expects him to stay true to his word and be my escort. Even though I am hopefully I am nervous and scared about everything. The Dowager believing its just nerves has attempted to comfort me saying that Nicki is a much finer dancer than Declyn but not as good as her Steven, who is supposedly a current day Fred Astaire. Well at least that is what I am led to believe. I swear every word out of her mouth is my Steven this and my Steven that, Declyn and Vanessa just roll their eyes. Last night at dinner it got so bad I expected Declyn to jump up and start yelling "Marsha, Marsha, Marsha…" OK totally unrealistic but still really funny.

The dance is tomorrow so I best put this pen down and get some rest. These days have flown so quickly I can barely believe that I have been here for almost 2 months. It feels like only yesterday.

Cross your fingers and wish me luck that I don't make a spectacle of myself tomorrow. Well I think this entry more than made up for all the days that I have missed.

NIGHT!!

No one bothered to wake her up, she rolled over and looked at her watch, it was ten am!

Jumping out of bed she readies herself quickly and made her way down the stairs. Hearing noises coming from the sun room she heads in that direction, opening the door she finds everyone gather together enjoying their breakfast.

"Good morning sleepy head!" exclaims Vanessa "We did not have the heart to wake you and it is best you got your sleep today you will be exhausted. Sit, sit" she motions to her seat.

Nina sits herself in her usual seat, looking over she sees Nicki's seat empty, his place setting untouched. Seeing the worry on her face Vanessa speaks up.

"He will be there tonight, I have no doubt, he is a man of his word if he is anything."

"Even I can attest to that" confirms Decklyn.

"But if he is not up to the task trust you me my dear, there will be plenty of men more than willing to take his place" he says with a wicked smile and wink.

He continues “Why if I was not..”

Vanessa swats at him playfully “Why you!!!”

As cheerful laughter fills the sun lit room Nina begins to relax and forget her troubles, rather looking forward to the nights festivities.

As the meal draws to an end there is a knock at the door.

A footman enters “There is a package for Miss Martin.”

“Thank you Fredric, please have it be given to Olivia and taken to Miss Martins quarters, we will be there shortly.” Vanessa says to the butler.

Rising from her seat Vanessa & says “Well we best get started.”

With that she and the Dowager as well as Nina and Josephine make their way to their respective chambers to begin preparations Josephine choosing to tag along with Nina.

By the time Nina enters her room she can already smell the rose lavender bath Olivia has drawn for her.

Entering she sees the packages from Evangeline on her bed itching to be unwrapped.

Josephine runs over to them excitedly, Nina laughs "Go ahead you open them."

Nina laughs at the vigor with which Josephine rips into the packages. Walking over to the bath she confirms with Olivia that order of preparation. Coming back into the room she sees wrapping and boxes strewn, littering the floor, and Josephine grinning like a Cheshire cat.

Nina looks at her expectantly "And…!?!"

"I cannot wait until I am old enough to wear such finery!"

"With Olivia's help all of the pieces are removed from their boxes, some being sent for pressing while others are just hung.

Nina looks on in awe as she comes out of the bath "really all of this for one night?"

Olivia laughs "Well this is not just any dinner and the Contessa went well and beyond to show her

appreciation. There is a letter for you from Evangeline."

Reading it Nina laughs "Yes it thus seems that the Countess is very old fashioned and even though Evangeline insisted that all of this was not necessary, she had no choice."

"Well let us begin."

For the next several hours Nina is pulled and prodded, twisted and turned. After a few finishing touches she stands before the mirror in awe.

"You look beautiful" Josephine laughs as she rounds the voluminous skirts to stand beside her.

The door to her chamber opens and the Dowager and Vanessa walk in and add simultaneously "Stunning", "A vision".

Nina smiles sheepishly turns to face them and looks over her shoulder whispering to herself "Not too shabby."

"Come my dear it is time" Vanessa waives her over.

Grabbing her mantle Nina joins the two women, as they begin their descent Josephine comes running after them waiving something in her hand.

“Nina wait there is one more.”

Nina stops and walks back up towards the little girl.

“This one was under all the wrappings” handing it over she whispers “it is from Nicki” she says grinning from ear to ear.

Taking the small package Nina sees that it is wrapped beautifully.

“Open it” Josephine urges, her eyes twinkling with anticipation.

“Removing the delicate wrapping she opens the box to find jewel encrusted ivory combs.

“So pretty” whispers Josephine, Nina overwhelmed only nods.

Without skipping a beat Josephine takes them from her “You must wear them, bend down I know just where they should go.”

“There perfect you see” proud of her cunning placement on top of Nina’s head just in front of the coil of hair which Olivia’s deft fingers arranged beautifully in order to keep her mane out of her face.

As Nina turns to admire the combs Josephine exclaims “Now you look like a queen!”

“Thank you my sweet” she replies eying herself in the full length of the mirror.

Once again she begins her descent gingerly making her way down so as to give herself time to fully compose herself by the time she reaches the bottom.

Half way down she looks up and sees Nicki smiling up at her. Shocked she stops, rooted to the spot. He walks up to meet her, taking her hand he bows and kisses the back of it.

“A promise is a promise and I never go back on my word,” he pauses for effect and he continues in a whisper “especially not to a goddess such as you.”

“I…” Nina begins.

“Shhh… mon coeur” he whispers as he takes his place beside her and lays her hand on the crook of his arm.

She nods her head “Then, I simply thank you” she finishes in a whisper.

Falling in step so easily they are on the landing before they know it.

“You look beautiful, really Evangeline has out done herself, do you not agree Nicki?” ask the Dowager.

“In my opinion it is not the dress that makes the woman but rather the woman who makes the dress. Regardless she is a vision, positively ethereal.”

“Hmm… yes” the Dowager agrees, Declyn rolls his eyes and Vanessa stifles a laugh.

“Well we best be on our way, the guest of honor must not be late.” Vanessa says as she ushers them out the door.

Nina walks out with Nicki going towards the Duke’s coach only to be redirected by Nicki to his own.

“Chère we cannot all fit in one therefore, I have brought my own so that you may be more comfortable.”

Confused and obviously frustrated at the thought of being with him alone in such an intimate and confined setting she answers “Ummm… yes thank you that was very thoughtful of you.”

Nicki nods and helps her up in to the coach, allowing her to get settled and then he enters himself. To her relief he seats himself on the opposite side.

“You look well” says Nicki to interrupt the uncomfortable silence which has ensued.

“Thank you as do you.” Remembering the lavish gift on top of her head she continues “You really didn’t have to, they are beautiful.”

He takes his time in answering, viewing it as an opportunity to take all of her in. Seeing his eyes roaming her body she innocently touches the combs on top of her head.

“The combs, you gifted me.”

“Mmmm…” he answers in appreciation.

“Yes, they were supposed to arrive earlier, they were a token so that you would not forget me while I was away.”

Feeling coy she answers “As if anyone could ever forget you.”

He smiles ruefully “Many have tried and even more have failed.”

Nina laughs “If that isn’t the truth, I don’t know what is.”

“So you agree that I am unforgettable” he drawls out in his velvety husky voice, leaning in a bit closer.

Caught in the moment Nina does not realize the trap she was stepping into.

‘Crap, crap, carp… what are you thinking woman!!! You cannot let your guard down with him. ‘As if anyone could ever forget you!’ she thinks to herself mockingly.

Stupid, stupid, stupid!!! That gave him the perfect opening to pull this stunt again. How the hell are you going to rain in his raging hormones? HOW!?!'

Composing herself she thinks 'Just change the subject to something completely nonsexual.'

"How is your family fairing? While you were away were you visiting them?"

"They are well thank you for asking. Actually you will have the opportunity to meet them tonight; they will also be in attendance."

"Splendid."

Smiling he continues "They are rather elated to meet you; I have told them much about you."

"All good things I hope" she smiles uncomfortably.

"But of course mon chère, always."

Turning her head to look out the window "I wish you wouldn't Nicki" she replies weakly.

"Why not? You are important to me."

In a soft velvety voice, the worlds rolling off his tongue like brandy he continues “I care very deeply about you, which you already know” he says looking at her under his lashes.

“Not tonight, please” looking down at her hands. “I am nervous enough as is; I need you to help me, to be there for me” she pauses.

Thinking she was done he begins to interject, as she looks up at him with sad eyes he forgets his words and she whispers “as a friend.”

He nods his head, now he turning his face toward the window replies. “I will be whatever you want me to be, mon coeur.”

She nods in agreement silently.

Just in time the coach pulls to a stop, the footman opens the door.

Nicki exists first, Nina gathers her skirts and with his help gracefully maneuvers herself out of the coach.

Declyn and Vanessa are waiting for them; together they enter with the droves of attendees which have

also arrived. Making their way up the steps each couple is announced, the doctor comes just in time to escort the Dowager down the stairs into the main foyer, next are the Duke and Duchess of *Crescentferd.*

As the herald is about to announce her and Nicki a strange panic overcomes her. Looking down she sees all eyes on them, her grip tightens on Nicki's hand. He smiles at her seeing the panic in her eyes he leans to whispers in her ear.

"Do not fret they are all in awe of the great mysterious beauty on my very fortunate arm."

Nina laughs and whispers back "so you mean they are looking at you and not at me then?"

"Precisely" with that the nods to the herald.

"Miss Nicolette Martin escorted by the Count Nicholas Devereux"

Nina hears Nicki whisper "Let the games begin."

Descending the stairs Nina looks to Vanessa for assurance and sees her dear friend beaming up at her. Reaching the foyer she is greeted by any and all, so

many names and titles. Some come out of curiosity, the women especially, every single bachelor out of the need to be found in her presence.

At every introduction to the ladies Nicolas boasts but, with the men especially those who show any interest he is curt. Placing his hand at the small of her back he escorts her out of each such situation. Secretly she smiles to herself, if the young gentleman was someone who would under normal circumstances peak her interest she would ask Nicki for his name again, her private form of torture for the poor guy.

After one particularly painful introduction they encounter a hoard of ladies who coincidentally found themselves in their path.

"Ladies" Nicki bows and Nina curtsies, after the short introductions the ladies take their leave, but not three feet away from them, they being to whisper just loudly for Nina to hear.

"What dress… I do not see what he sees in her… not as beautiful as they say… the way they all gather around her..." Not wanting Nina to hear any more of their

rubbish Nicki turns them about only to find his path blocked by a beauty clad in scarlet red.

“Mon Dieu Nicki!”

“Ah… yes Raquelle…” Nicki says uncomfortably, now he tightening his hold on Nina, sensing this Nina prompts him to introduce them.

“Miss Nicolette Martin, this is Mademoiselle Raquelle Baptisse”.

“It is my pleasure” says Nina curtsying.

As she does Raquelle looks down at her “Oui, por vous” before turning her attentions back to Nicki.

Coming to her full height Nina is fuming, whilst Raquelle is completely unfazed never taking her eyes off Nicki. Batting more than just an eyelash, she is stroking his arm whilst whispering sweet nothings in his ear.

Nina takes this time to pull away from Nicki, relieved yet somewhat peeved she sees Vanessa and makes her way towards her.

Just as she is about to reach her intended party her path is obstructed, by a devastatingly gorgeous man.

"Your seem to have lost your escort, may I be of service" he bows deeply before her, she extends her hand and he gently places a kiss on top of it.

"I do not believe we have been properly introduced" she says taken back by his exceptionally good looks and manners.

Straightening yet still keeping a gentle hold on her hand he continues with the most bewildering smile "No to my misfortune we have not, your escort has been quite adept at keeping you away from me. But as he is now too distracted," he nods to the pained Nicky who is attempting to come out of Raquelles grasp.

"I have decided to steal you away."

Clicking his heals together he ostentatiously introduces himself with yet another one of his seductive and playful smiles "Baron Christoff Von *Furstenberg at your service Mademoiselle."*

Nina laughs "It is my pleasure."

Seeing her eying the Duke and Duchess he escorts her over whilst introducing her to all that are in their path, passing on interesting facts on all, keeping her smiling and giggling the whole way through.

Nina spies Nicki peeking at her over Raquelles shoulder with an exasperated apologetic expression on his face. She nods her head in understanding and turns her attention back to her new escort.

Stopping before the Duke and Duchess, Christoff exchanges pleasantries with Decklyn, Vanessa and the Dowager.

"My man, good show I did not think anyone would be adept at distracting Nicholas enough to steal Nicolette away." Decklyn says boisterously as he clasps his hand and thumps him on the back.

Winking at Nina Christoff replies "Knowing his weakness it was not too difficult."

Nina eyes Nicki from the corner of her eye and sees Raquelle vying for his attentions, clinging to him like a cheap suit. Vexed at the sight but even more annoyed for caring what he does and with whom he does it

with, she takes Christoff by the hand when offered and allows him to escort her as they continue their rounds with the Duke.

Christoff turns all his attentions to Nina keeping her glass full at all times keeping body contact with her constantly, whether by keeping her hand on the crook of his arm or gentle pressure on the small of her back.

The soft whispers in her ear keep her laughing, either due to the witty comments of the bubbly she doesn't know, but she is loving the carefree attention. For once she is not thinking of the consequences, for the first time since coming here everything is on track, and so Nina succumbs to his charms.

"Are you enjoying yourself Miss Nicolette?" he asks knowing full well her answer.

"Mmm…" she answers with a nod whilst mid sip of her latest flute of champagne.

" I am well aware that I am being rather ostentatious in presuming that your dance card is not already full, but may I have the pleasure of the first dance?"

Hearing this Vanessa chimes in "There is still some room on it but to your misfortune the first dance is reserved for her escort."

In that moment Nicki materializes out of nowhere at Nina's side.

"Christoff thank you for keeping Nicolette entertained, though from here on in I will assume my duties and take care of her needs" he says a bit too politely as he places a hand on her waist and begins to draw her away from Christoff.

Not waiting for the interlude to end Christoff attempts to engage Nicki in conversation whilst keeping Nina within arm's length.

"It has been some time since I had seen you last Nicholas" says Christoff.

Gripping his outstretched hand tightly "Hmm… yes, though it never seems long enough, now does it" his smile more like a friendly sneer.

Wanting to get under his skin further Christoff inquires "And how is the fair Mademoiselle Raquelle, it is so nice to see the two of you together again. Were

the two of you not together at the Count Bastilles Holiday outing?" He says smugly.

"Yes it is nice to see old friends though, if my memory serves me right it was the two of you who became fast 'friends' that holiday" Nicki adds with a sly glint in his eye.

For a split second Christoff's face reflects anger for being exposed and his own plan thwarted by the truth.

Nina is oblivious to all of this, still sipping on her champagne. Innocently she looks from one man to the other, her buzz causing her to take a bit longer to process what is going on. The niceties just barely cloaking the overt distain stemming from both men.

Squeezed between the two Nina finally snaps out of her fuzzy world to the harsh reality of the testosterone driven argument.

Not knowing whether to be angry of flattered Nina chooses the latter grabbing both men by the arm, she smiles "Now gentlemen, no reason to bicker. I have more than enough room on my dance card for both of you."

Turning to Christoff "Though it is only fair that Nicki gets the first dance, it is his prerogative as my escort."

Letting go of his arm she turns her attentions to Nicki. Patting his forearm "now if you are done wooing all the unattached ladies perhaps you would like to continue your escort duties" she says with a teasing smile on her face.

"My apologies" he bows his head obviously vexed that his distraction allowed Christoff to weasel his way into her company.

Not giving up so easily Christoff inquires "If Miss Martin thus not protests I would like to remain in her company."

Decklyn interjects "Surely Nina would have no objections." He smiles at the already fuming Nicki.

Before Nina could respond the bell for dinner chimes and all are ushered into the dining room. Nina allows Nicki to escort her as she keeps her eyes ahead of her not wanting to make contact with either man beside her.

As the guest of honor Nina is seated at the main table to the right of Fiona and her aunt. To Nina's right is Nicki and then the Duke, Douches and the Dowager with the Doctor. The rest of the guests are seated according to their rank, station or social standing. To Nicki's relief there was no room for Christoff at the main table, so he was forced to return to his original seating.

The room is painted a soft pale blue with white and gold detailing on the walls and ceiling. A warm serene atmosphere is created by the giant candelabras and candle sticks covering every available surface. Thanks to all the champagne Nina is feeling warm and fuzzy with a great buzz to boot.

The food is delicious as is the wine which has yet to cease to flow.

Just as she gestures for her glass to be refilled once more Nicki leans over and whispers "Mon Chère, I do think you have had enough."

Usually Nina would be irritated by such a comment but tonight she just feels too good to care.

Smiling wickedly she whispers back "Why, do you fear that with another glass I will be far too susceptible to all the bachelors' advances?"

Chuckling he answers back "No, I fear you will not be able to stand and I will have to carry you about. Just think of those poor boys whose hearts you will be breaking because you will be in my arms the whole night." Mockingly he rethinks the earlier comment "I retract my prior statement; please allow me to replenish your glass." He says in jest.

"Oh you wicked, wicked man" she says as she swats his arm, but she awkwardly misses and falls in his embrace instead.

Shocked she looks up just as Nicki looks down at her, his eyes smoldering as a smile begins to creep from his slow drawn lips to his warm laughing eyes. His voice deepens to a rich husky tone drenched with the obvious want of his eyes. "Mon Coeur I think I like you best tipsy, somehow you always find yourself in my arms. I would gladly keep you like this all night, but it is unseemly and I rather not have you make the wrong impression on these people."

“Yes, thank you” she whispers with an almost petrified look on he face as she scrambles to right herself.

Seeing the exchange Vanessa internalizes a small hurray as she looks over to the Contessa Devereux and winks. An all too knowing smile spreads on both women’s faces.

Patting Nina’s hand Vanessa attempts to calm the girl she whispers “do not fret my dear, no one saw that, just make sure not to show favoritism to one young man over another. Nicki is of course a different situation as he is your escort, his privileges are different from those of others. Do take care to spread your attention evenly so as not to dissuade possible matches and therefore limit your choices.”

Realizing what Vanessa is insinuating Nina stops her.

“Nessa, you do know I do not plan on staying I wish to go home and do not wish to do so with a broken heart.”

Vanessa interjects “Yes dearest what if you cannot, would you not prefer to fall in love and have a family and make this your home, you should not dismiss any

possibility until you know for certain. And you know not if Mr. Scott's experiments will yield any results. I just want you to keep all of your options open."

Nodding Nina concedes "That is fair enough I suppose. I will do my best."

"That is all that I ask. Oh here comes Christoff! He has taken quite a shining to you, to poor Nicki's horror."

"I was going to ask is this animosity because of me or is there more to this story?"

"We can speak of this later; now on you go enjoy yourself."

As Christoff nears Nicki turns his back to Nina, "Vanessa, do you mind me stealing Nina away, there are a few guests I wish to introduce her too."

"Go ahead; she and I can continue this conversation at a later date."

Helping her up he turns his back to the approaching Christoff attempting to put as much distance between them as possible.

“Who are you introducing me too?” she inquires.

“You mentioned you wished to meet my family, and I thought this would be the opportune time.”

“Oh...” she is taken back “family “she stammers.

Hearing her name called, she turns sees Christoff trying to follow but his path now is being blocked by the infamous Raquelle.

As they proceed she turns her attentions back to Nicki. He smugly smiles at her “I can be ruthless as well. I cannot believe he used Raquelle in his attempt to distract me earlier.”

“If I remember that was no attempt, he was quite successful” she quips raising one eyebrow.

“Hmmm… well yes.”

Nina laughs at his effort at making up an excuse.” Patting his arm she changes the subject. “I mean to ask you earlier, what is between the two of you? It seems more than just playful banter you have with Declyn.”

“Yes it is quite different but that story best saved for another day, no need to spoil the night.”

“Nicholas my darling boy” exclaims the woman before them.

"Nicolette may I present mon mère the Countess Marguerite Devereux ."

"Enchante..." Nina curtsies.

"I have heard much about you my dear." She says offering Nina her hand.

Nina curtsies, taking the woman’s frail hand.

Nicki is pulled away by a crowd of old school mates.

Leaning towards Nina she whispers "My son, I believe is smitten ".

Nina follows her gaze to Nicki who is fondly glancing back at both while listening to a fellow guests fairly animated speech.

Sitting back up the Contessa continues "I just had to meet you for myself. I have been watching you with him this eve, and it is clear to me now what it is that has him fascinated so."

Nina shocked and surprised now realizes where Nicki gets his forwardness from.

Smiling kindly Nina responds "I am rather fond of Nicki, though it appears that he has invested far more of himself in this relationship than he should have."

Stopping her, the Contessa raises her hand, brandishing the same wicked lopsided grin she says "Yes knowing his father's ways which he has obviously inherited, I am certain that he has more than overstepped his bounds. Do you not think it adds to his charm?"

Not waiting for Nina to answer she continues in a matter of fact tone "There is something to be said about a man who will stop at nothing to get what he wants."

"I agree, it is becoming devastatingly difficult to say no to him. But I must say I do not wish to raise his hopes, I have made my intentions clear to him."

"Hmm… yes. I have heard that you have been playing the coy maiden. You have been driving him mad" she chuckles.

“All I can say is” taking her by the hand she gives it a pat “be prepared my dear, for I do not see him letting you go quite so easily”.

As Nicki returns to Nina’s side the Contessa gathers her skirts to stand, Nicki steps forward to assist her as she waivers. She gives her son a peck on the cheek and Nina a warm hug. “Enough about that, off with the two of you, go and be merry for those of us who cannot.” She adds with an all knowing wink.

With that they say their goodbyes as the night of dancing is about to commence.

“I apologize for leaving you alone with my mother; it was not my intention to leave you defenseless with her brash tongue.”

“Oh no, she is lovely. Now I see from whom you have inherited your…” she pauses for effect “your startling blue eyes.”

“My blue…” Nicki bursts out laughing and Nina joins in.

“Mmmm… yes my blue eyes I most definitely inherited from my darling mother”.

With that they continue on to the main ball room, it is filled with guests anticipating the dancing to begin. The orchestra begins to play and the crowd parts, passing before Nicolette is Contessa Gertrude Parrish with Lady Fiona and Lord Jacob Dartmouth in tow.

With a wave of Contessa's hand the orchestra picks up the melody and Fiona's escort takes her by the hand and they begin to waltz.

"Her dress is stunning!" exclaims an onlooker.

"I heard it is a one of a kind creation by Madame Evangeline."

"How ever did she, come to have such connections, I have been waiting for years to have a meeting?"

Vanessa interjects "You must not be aware that Lady Fiona is a dear friend of Miss Martin who is a close friend and business associate of Madame Evangeline. As for the dress, it was a collaboration between Madame Evangeline and Miss Martin."

Not realizing that it was Vanessa who uttered the words the onlooker sneers "How ever did someone like her acquire such desirable acquaintances?"

Standing straight Vanessa boast as she squeezes past the group of women "Miss Marin has friends in rather high places, and rightfully so."

Nodding her head "Ladies" she continues to walk right through the circle they have created knowing full well she has left them mouth agape. Because of her comment the women make a beeline for Nina crowding around her just to better their status.

'Thankfully Nicolette will be able to distinguish between her friends and mere social lechers such as these. At least they attention will make her experience more enjoyable'she thinks to herself as she sees them approach Nina and she regards them kindly.

As the song comes to a close Nicki approaches Nina for the next dance which is designated for the guest of honor. Upon his advance he is spied by the ladies who almost instantaneously forget about Nina and begin to fawn over him. Each attempting to come up with a cleaver quip, just to be the one to engage him in a conversation, and keep him in their presence just a bit longer. Nicki kindly replies to all and at a brief pause jumps at the chance to excuse himself and Nina.

“My apologies ladies but the Contessa will have my head if I do not produce this lovely creature, onto the dance floor before the interlude has come to a close” he bows to the group as a collective and offers Nina the crook of his arm.

“My goodness you had them in falling all over themselves vying for your attention.”

Smiling smugly “Yes well I seem to have that effect on most women, curiously enough it does not seem to work on you?”

Trying to keep the conversation light and boost his slightly deflated ego she continues unfazed by his last comment “There are so many handsome eligible bachelors, yet you are the one to inspire such chaos. It really is bewildering.” She adds in jest, getting him to crack a smile and stop brooding on his last comment.

Playing along Nicki continues “Oh and pray tell, who do you think deserves such admiration if not I?”

“You are by far one of the handsomest, but are you the wealthiest?”

Disappointed he asks "Is the deciding factor really the money?"

Seeing the light fade from his eyes she replies kindly in a matter of fact way.

"No not for me personally, but I would imagine that for some of the ladies without means of their own, they would want a guarantee of financial security over that of love, looks or companionship."

"What do you value most?" He asks as they walk on to the dance floor.

Nina curtsies and Nicki bows, coming to his full height he takes her hand and places a kiss upon it. Still holding on to her hand they both take a step forward bringing their bodies closer together, Nicki slips his left hand about her waist and they begin to waltz. They do one full turn around the empty floor and once they have slipped into a comfortable rhythm and Nina has relaxed in his arms Nicki asks her again.

She answers wistfully "I value the heart above all. Beauty fades and so may the fortune, but the heart, the core of a person will always stay. When I am old and

gray I want to spend my remaining days with the love of my life, with my best friend, with the man who knows my heart just as well as his own."

Her answer brings a gentle smile to Nicki's lips.

As the melody picks up there is no place for conversation, they glide on the dance floor to a chorus of whispers. Nina is too immersed in the dance to notice or even care, she is just grateful that Nicki is such a skilled dancer, so much so that the dance has become so fluid and effortless it is almost euphoric.

Before she realizes the waltz has come to an end as Nicki slips his hand off her waist while still holding on to her hand to bow before her once again. Nina smiles sheepishly beside him as the rest of the guests begin to join them on the dance floor. Nina's next dance partner is eagerly waiting for Nicki to relinquish her to him and finally Nicki does so reluctantly.

"Miss Martin, it is an honor and highly anticipated delight" the young man in his early twenties bows before her, she returns his kindness with a curtsy and a bright smile.

“It is my pleasure Lord Garret.”

He sweeps her into his arms as they blend into the crowd of dancers. Peeking over his shoulder Nina sees Nicki following their every move, frowning every time she laughs or even looks at her dance partner.

Standing at the edge of the dance floor he becomes a victim to Nina’s prior lady acquaintances as one manages to rather forcefully persuade him to dance with her.

Nicki agrees just to stop her from prattling on and, to better keep tabs on Nina.

‘What could he possibly be saying that is so witty to make her laugh so? I have been in his presence before he is not exceptionally interesting or intelligent. She must be humoring him by reacting to him in that manner’ *Nicki thinks to himself.*

His partner has yet to cease her endless chatter, but Nicki has not heard a word of it, being far too preoccupied with Nina and her partner to pay her much attention. Sporadically he nods his head or

smiles at her, which unfortunately encourages her even more.

‘Insolent woman just stop jabbering I cannot hear their conversation’ *he thinks to himself.*

The song thankfully comes to an end and Nicki thanks his partner and leaves her before she can utter another word. He makes a beeline for Nina but before he can get to her she is in yet another bachelors arms.

“How heart wrenching” Vanessa comments to the Dowager.

“Yes that poor boy has fallen head over heels; his actions have sent quite a few tongues wagging.”

Vanessa walks over to Nicki’s sister and brings the issue to her attention.

“Thank you your ladyship I will speak to him immediately. I have noticed the same and had hoped it was just a momentary lapse of judgment.”

Emma walks over to her brother she places her hand on his arm and whispers into his ear. Nicki nods as he

escorts Emma away from the dance floor and they walk towards the balcony.

On her fifth dance partner Nina is enjoying herself immensely, all of the gentlemen have been sweet and surprisingly light on their feet. Some shyer then others, while others a bit more persistent, she was able to enjoy all of their company. Many begged for a second dance but that would be against protocol as she was reminded of Vivian's words not to show favor to any in particular.

Checking her dance card she sees her next partner is Nicki, she was happy to see that he has kept his distance, but now he is nowhere to be found.

Suddenly she feels a hand brush hers and she finds Christoff standing opposite of her bowing.

"It seems your are without a partner yet again, it is inexcusable to leave a lady such as yourself waiting I am more than happy take his place."

Without waiting for her to reply Christoff takes her by the hand and escorts her to the floor.

“Pray tell my dear who is the fool whose place I am fortunate to take?”

“I would not call him a fool, as most likely he has been taken prisoner by a crowd of eligible ladies fawning for his attention.”

“Ahhh… so it is safe to assume you are speaking of your escort.”

Nina nods in response.

“I regret to inform you my love that he has most likely found someone of a different persuasion to entertain him while you are distracted with all of these eager pups.”

Slightly vexed by the initial sting of his words Nina is quickly relieved that Nicki has taken her words to heart.

“Under the circumstances I am relieved.”

“Really” he says in surprise “I am glad to hear that” he says with that devastating smile gracing his lips as he brings her just a bit closer to him as he takes her into a spin.

He is quite charming and dashing his smile dangerous and seductive all at the same time. His eyes never leave her face as if attempting to convey their own message.

As their dance comes to an end Nina curtsies to him and he retorts in a husky voice, "I do believe I have you for the next few dances my dear."

"I am grateful" checking her card she continues "but I do believe Monsieur Dubois is my next partner."

"Dubois was kind enough to relinquish his dance to me, as have quite a few of your other dance partners. I shall have you to myself for the rest of the night."

Nervous Nina retorts "I am flattered but must ask that you play fair, Baron."

"All is fair in love and war, my dear and I intend to win your hand if you allow me to." He says in a very charming way.

The next song begins and without waiting for Nina to rebuff he takes her into his arms and they being to dance yet again. The song is livelier and with the interchange of partners throughout the song it does

not seem like she is favoring Christoff any more than the rest of the bachelors.

The dance ends with Nina in the arms of her originally intended partner.

Nina says to him, "Monsieur Dubois I am glad I had the opportunity to dance with you even though you choose to relinquish your dance."

He bows to her and kisses her outstretched hand "The Baron is a rather persistent man, you should be flattered he when through all that trouble to secure himself a place on your dance card. Though now that I stand before you, I do regret my choice."

"I hope that at the next gathering you will not be so lackadaisical?" she says with a laugh.

"If given another opportunity I most certainly will not, Miss Martin."

With that Christoff appears at Nina's side. "Shall we my dear?"

"Where pray tell are you taking me?"

“For a leisurely walk, it has become quite stifling in here and while I still have a dance or two on your card I rather not spend them on the dance floor.

A servant walks up to the Baron and offers him a bottle of champagne and two flutes.

“I thought we could take a walk out on the terrace” She agrees, they walk out and situate themselves at a more secluded spot but still in full public view. Nina is exceedingly thirsty and gulps down the champagne faster than intended.

Wide eyed Christoff is surprised “A woman after my own heart” he chuckles as he replenishes her flute.

They toast to the season and continue their conversation. Before they know it the bottle is empty, they leave it behind and continue walking the grounds. Once they have come full circle they walk down the stairs to the actual gardens which are quite populated with guests trying to cool off on a surprisingly warm night.

Christoff begins to insatiably flirt and between the champagne which is now coursing through her veins

and the romance of the moonlight she allows it. Unbenounced to her he leads her to a more secluded area a labyrinth of sorts. By the time she realizes where they are it is too late to turn back. The realization of it has caused her to panic and returns her to a more lucid state.

Having no choice but to follow Christoff she continues on, they come to a clearing with a gazebo situated next to a small pond. The light of the full moon bathes the scene in a soft bright glow.

Nina lets go of the Barons arm in order to survey her surroundings better.

Christoff reaches for and she accepts not wanting to let on that something is amiss. He leads her up to the gazebo and he stands with her in the middle of it. The roof of the structure is a wide opening which at the moment is at perfect alignment with the rays of the moon bathing them both in its light.

'In any other situation this would be an incredibly romantic scene, in this case it is pretty frightening' she thinks to herself. 'Especially with a perfect stranger who has brought her here for god only knows what

reason. How could she be so stupid!!!?'She screams internally.

The now obviously intoxicated Christoff is holding her lightly against him. He is swaying to a tune only he can hear as he begins to hum the melody into her ear.

All she can concentrate on is getting herself out of this predicament, well that and his putrid breath which she cannot believe she did not notice before.

Upon his attempt to spin her, she intentionally spins out of his grasp and rushes down the stars, not wanting to anger him she pretends to be as inebriated as he when she asks" Let us return, I wish to dance once again?"

"Why my dear we can dance all you wish here in private."

Holding up her card "But my dance partners they will be upset if I do not dance with them when it is their turn."

"Do not fret, I took care of that, like I said before, you are mine for the remainder of the night."

He stands before her with open arms as if she should thank him for his grand gesture.

When she fails to comply he grabs her to bring her in for a kiss.

As the song begins to come to an end Nicki leaves his drink at the bar and returns to the dance floor. His path is once again obscured by Raquelle.

"Mon Chère there you are, I do believe this dance is mine" she says waiving her dance card.

"I do not recall asking for a dance." He rebuffs staring over her shoulders seeing Christoff approaching Nina.

"No you did not ask for a, dance you minx, you asked for all of them. You best not embarrass me by leaving me without a partner" she retorts, her voice reaching a loud enough tone to bring notice to themselves.

Not to further draw attention to them Nicki complies. Though he tries to lead and maneuver them closer to Nina and Christoff his attempts are thwarted by an uncooperative Raquelle. Forced to stay at bay Nicki is losing his patience and cannot wait for the song to end so that he can once again be by Nina's side.

As the song comes to a close Nicki unceremoniously let's go of Raquelle and leaves her on the dance floor. Just as he does the next song picks up and the dance floor is flooded with dancing couples swinging from one partner to the next. Nicki is having a hard time getting through the throng of dancers to make his way to Nina. Just as he is about to reach for Nina he is spun right into Raquelles more than willing arms.

Angry he whispers through his clenched jaw "You again?!?"

He pulls her off the dance floor into a corner away from prying ears.

"You cannot possibly this dense, you made your bed now you must lie in it cold, and alone. Or best yet with that weasel I caught you with, I have no interest being in your presence now or ever. I have been quite tolerant up to now but going forth you best not test my patience because I have none left. Go forth and find someone else to play your pathetic games with."

Pulling him closer to her "I am glad to know I can still insight such passion in you." she purrs "We were so good together mon chère, do not throw it away."

“No you threw it away with your promiscuous ways, I was ready to give you everything…” shaking his head, “This is not the time or the place, we have gone through this already, let me live my life, while you go continue to live in the past.”

As he looks up the dance floor has been cleared and Nina is nowhere in sight.

“Y our time is better spent focusing on the ladies who yearns for your company not those who seem to avoid it. Such as that trollop who had been enticing you all night only to leave on Christoffs arm."

He spins back to look her in the face, the force of the turn causes her to fall back he grabs for her, holding on a bit tighter than intended “She what!”

“Where has he taken her?”

“Let go of me before I SCREAM!!” She spits back into his face.

“Oh you do not have to say it twice, I regret having ever soiled my hands with the likes of you” he says to her face as he leaves her behind in search of Nina.

On his way up the main hall he glimpses through a window a familiar profile lit by the rays of the moon.

“Nina” he whispers.

He takes off for the balcony not quite running but not taking a gingerly stroll either. A few individuals attempt to stop him for a quick chat, he shrugs them off focused on getting to Nina and putting as much distance between her and Christoff.

He loses sight of them as he comes out on to the balcony, panicked he searches for her face among those in the crowd, she is nowhere to be found. Looking out further he finally glimpses her as she enters the labyrinth on the other side of the gardens.

Not wanting to attract attention to himself he walks in shadow as fast as his legs can carry him. When he is fully immersed in darkness he takes off in a sprint trying to close the gap between them as quickly as possible.

He curses himself under his breath for ever letting her out of his sight moreover, for not warning her about the lecher before.

Nina wiggles out of his grasp which angers him more, she tries to skip over on to the other side of the pond.

"Oh no you don't" he grabs her by her arm and pulls her back over to his side. Holding her in his vise like arms she is incapable of escaping. He turns her so that she is facing him and tries to kiss her; she turns her head at every attempt angering him further.

Moving one arm lower to her waist he grabs her face with the other. He crushes he lips on to hers muffling her screams of protest.

Breaking the kiss he rasps in her ear "I like a woman with spirit and passion but you would find it much more enjoyable to cooperate my dear."

Angry beyond words she looks him in the face and it dawns on her, years of self defense classes prepared her for just this. She pulls away slightly to give herself more room as she knees him in the groin. Unfortunately her voluminous skirts did not let her exude as much force as she would have liked, regardless the desired effect was achieved as he let go of her and backs away holding himself.

Not waiting for him to recover she runs only to be caught in his grasp once more. Grabbing her from the back in a bear hug Nina wastes no time she stomps with her heal on to his foot with all her might, as he screams out in pain his hold on her lessens and she uses her elbow to strike him in the face, he lets her go yet again as he collapses to the ground. Nina goes to make a run for it yet again but her foot twists as her heal breaks from contact with his foot, she stumble and Christoff manages to grab her by the ankle pulling her to the ground.

Entering the labyrinth Nicki hears a muffle of voices and follows them only to hit a dead end. Doubling back he takes a different route, the voices are getting louder and he hears Nina ask Christoff to return her to the dance. He hears fear creep into her voice as she continues attempt to cajole him into showing her the way out. Angry Nicki hastens his pace only to hear Nina's muffled protest, furious he breaks into a sprint when he finally sees the light at the end of the tunnel.

Christoff pulls her closer to him holding her down with his own body weight Nina tries to move but she can't

he has her pinned. Changing tactics she does just as he suggested she begins to cooperate. She kisses him deeply until he begins to relax, as soon as he lets go of her hands she wraps them around him and with all her might she flings her body using his as counter weight to put him on his back. Not realizing he has been duped Christoff pulls her in for a kiss yet again, Nina yells NO… DON'T… STOP.

Just as those words escape her lips Nicki comes out of the labyrinth to find Nina straddling Christoff. Not knowing who to be more furious with, himself, her or the slithering snake he yells "Get up!"

"No, Nicki…"

"No get up or by God I will…"

"No Nicki it is not what you think, he was…" she sputters as she attempts to get up. She tries to get her footing but Christoff is holding her down, further complicating the situation by making it look like she doesn't want to get up.

Furious to have been caught in such a compromising situation when in fact she has been only defending her honor, Nina is livid.

She screams at Christoff "Let me go this instant you sad excuse for a man."

"Ah look now she tries to make it seem like she didn't want it. Nickolas you really have a way of picking them no?"

Not waiting for him to release her she uses the heel of her hand she strikes him in the jaw, he releases her and she stands. Nicki tries to grab for her but the look in her eyes deters him from doing so.

Coming too Christoff gets up only to be punched square in the face by a livid Nicki. Leaving him knocked out sprawled on the grass Nicki runs after Nina.

Catching up to her he yells "where do you think you are going?"

"Don't you dare speak to me, how dare you assume…!" she is rendered speechless as the reality of her previous situation finally hits her.

“What were you thinking, leaving with him, you dare embarrass me and the Douches with such behavior...” angry she isn’t responding he grabs for her.

She pulls away not wanting to look at him. Infuriated that she is not even bothering to defend her actions he loses his patience and grabs her, swings her over his shoulder and carries her out of the gardens heading straight for their carriage.

Irate Nina is kicking and punching him with all her might yelling “let me go you swine, I am not a piece of meat you can just sling over your shoulder, I am sick and tired of being treated like this. Let me go this instant!!!!!”

He puts her into the carriage and slams the door behind them.

The ride continues in silence, as they reaches the Wakefield manor Nicki opens the door and drags her out of it pulling her behind him to the gardens.

Livid, emotionally drained and physically exhausted Nina begs him to let her go.

On the verge of tears she begs him “Please Nicki…” but her pleads fall on deaf ears.

When they are finally far away from the house he stops and lets her go.

With his back still to her he asks her "Why are you acting like this?”

But instead of it being in a demanding manner for which she was prepared it’s a pleading one instead “Why are you avoiding me, and that whole thing with Christoff I know it was just to infuriate me."

"I am not and…, no… it was not…" she says defensively seeing the pain in his eyes.

Stopping her he cuts in "I told you that….."

Knowing full well where this is going she interjects.

"Yes I know what you said Nicki but I know that’s not how you feel. You are incapable of thinking of me in a platonic way no matter how hard you try to convince yourself or me."

"I tried to stay away from you, I pushed you away to alleviate the problem but you are intent on being

my shadow. So yes, I was a bit more coquettish with Christoff in hopes you would understand and let me be, but as always that was not how it turned out. I have no interest in him, I really don't have an interest in anyone, I am just here to enjoy the season and then I am off… perhaps even sooner." she says with melancholy in her voice which Nicki is too self involved to hear.

Angry that she confirmed his suspicions he steps forward "Why, why can it not be me! I love you; I would do anything for you" he steps closer to her she can feel his body heat radiating towards her.

He whispers in a pleading way "Why won't you just let me love you?"

Her hand reaches up to his face, she places her open palm on his cheek and he raises his own to cover it.

Cradling it gently he closes his eyes and she whispers.

"Nicki darling, you do not love me, you think you do, you hope you do, but you don't."

"You just don't want to lose me to anyone else. You lost in love once and you are so adamant not to lose

again that you built this whole fantasy around your fascination with me. And you are so blinded by it you don't see that it is just that a fantasy, not a reality yours or mine."

Infuriated he squeezes her hand "NO! Don't tell me how I feel I know my own feelings, I LOVE YOU!!"

Angry that he is refusing to listen she pulls back her hand but he is not about to let her go. She pulls more forcefully "Steven let me go!"

"Steven well isn't that typical. I KNEW IT!! You are holding out for him aren't you!! What is it with all of you women and the Wakefield's?" he yells out in disgust.

"Oh for God's sake not this again. I DON'T EVEN KNOW STEVEN!! It was just a Freudian slip; they have been talking about him so much it just came out."

Angry now with his accusations she yells back in his face "You know what, I don't need to defend myself. I tried to do this in a way where it would not hurt you but obviously you need a bigger reality check? I'm

done with this" throwing her hands up in the air she begins to walk away.

As she does Nicki grabs her by the hand "Oh no you don't, not that easy!"

Angry at being man handled she turns around to face him as she does she yells back "You think this has been easy, nothing about my life has been easy, especially since I got here." And jerks her hand out of his grasp.

Startled at the intensity of her statement he lets go, as he does, she pulls back her hand and slaps him, hard.

Shocked, confused and emotionally drained Nina's eyes go wide as she steps toward him with one hand reaching out towards him and the other covering her mouth in disbelief at her action.

It takes Nicki a moment to process what just happened, angry he grabs her outstretched hand pulls her toward him and through clenched teeth growls "I will never give up!" and he mercilessly lowers his lips to hers.

He holds her so tight that her form is melded to his. He kisses her hard, angry, pouring every ounce of

himself into it. Willing himself and her to respond the way he fantasized all those times before.

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Chapter 6

At Water's Edge - Chapter 9

Hi Guys!!! Long time no post I know, well here it is the highly anticipated Ch 9. I hope you think it was worth the wait. I know I always say it, but this one was realy hard to write, the reasons will be self evident a few lines below. Please let me know what you think, I don’t care if you are issuing death threats for what I’ve done ;) any reaction is a good one. J If you have questions please feel to leave them at the end of the chapter or send me a private message.

Also I wish to apologise I have been calling one character by the wrong name and perhaps created some confusion. Poor Tristan I have been calling him Thian for quite a few chapters now. I love both

names and don't know which I should keep. So please Vote for your favorite, the one with most responses by the time I post Ch 10 will be the winning name.

Happy reading!!!!

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“H… how can it be?” he whispers “There is absolutely nothing there, it is like kissing my own sister” he punctuates with his usual sly smile, which never quite reaches his eyes.

She smiles through her tears, jokingly pushing him away “Ugh do not utter such blasphemy, it would me more as if you were kissing a really good friend you have no romantic feelings for. Sister… really Nicki…”

“But…”

She nods “I love you too, though not in that manner, I knew it, though secretly I had hoped I was wrong.”

“I know, and I appreciate your attempt to humor my crazy notion.”

Pulling her into a hug he kisses her cheek, letting go he takes her hand and leads her to the bench and they sit together in silence for a bit.

He breaks the pregnant pause “Please accept my sincerest apologizes for not warning you about Christoff, truth be told I never imagined you would have gone off with a complete stranger. You know not everyone is as gallant as I.”

“Oh … some gentleman you were tonight, flinging me over your shoulder, abducting me and then ravishing me in the garden… really gentleman like Monsieur” she says jokingly, nudging him with her shoulder.

“Yes well you forced my hand” he spies her “Christoff truly?” His beautifully face contorted in disbelief “Please tell me that the display was only to drive me mad with jealousy. You cannot prefer him to even me, one for whom you have no romantic feelings for?”

“No, Christoff was an error in judgment; as soon as I realized where he was taking me I wanted to turn and run. Regretfully I was scared of getting lost and did not wish to make a spectacle of myself, and embarrass you or the family. I was so relieved to see you come and rescue me.”

Faking a faint she falls across his lap “My hero!!!”

Looking up at him she continues “Though I am vexed that you assumed that I am…” she searches for the right word “a… loose natured woman.”

Wagging her finger at him she continues "Do not dare deny it, I saw the look in your eye when you caught us in that most compromising of positions."

"What was I to think, the two of you rolling about in the grass, you straddling him, absolutely un-lady like." He chuckles "though I must admit I was enraged with jealousy. All my efforts to no avail and one dance with him and you are rolling about like a harlot."

"I got him on his back, but not out of passion" sitting up she goes on to recount the story which has Nicky roaring in laughter.

She sighs deeply "I like this, I feel such comfort with you, and I would have hated to lose your friendship because I did not return your affections."

His hand covers hers and he speaks looking away from her "I will be leaving tomorrow I have business to attend to, I will be gone for some time. In addition I need to... I need some time away. This" he gestures to their new comfortableness with each other "is good, regardless I need some time to accept the idea, I need to process what has happened."

Turning towards her he continues holding her hands firmly clasped in his "I will return in time for the subsequently ball, I do not go back on my word. Though this time I will not let you out of my sight, we do not fancy a repeat of tonight" he chuckles. Kissing her hand he stands and escorts her back to the mansion.

As they reach the door to her chamber he pulls her in for a hug "Thank you for being so kind to my foolish affections."

She looks up at him "Thank you for being my friend" standing on her tippy toes she kisses his cheek and enters her room.

Dear D,

This has been the most emotionally draining day ever between being man handled by that beast, and then the end to the fantasy with Nicki I really don't know which was harder on me. I dare not even think what would have happened if Nicki hadn't shown up when he did. I am sure I would have been able to inflict a massive amount of pain on that bastard but ... D, I have never been so scared in my

life, all those years of training to prepare me for such situations and I just froze.

Thankfully my instinct of self preservation, or was it just pure anger at his deplorable behavior and shameless disregard for women, which flipped the switch from fear to blinding anger. All in all I am quite proud of myself but, truth be told I was glad that Nicki found me. Thinking back, the look in his eyes when he saw me with Christoff, there was such sadness, which quickly grew to rage, especially when he saw that it was not my choice to be there moreover, in such a compromising position.

That same sadness was amplified a thousand fold when he finally realized the truth. Though I am relieved that at last he knows, I can't help but feel empty now, now that I too have been slapped in the face by the reality of it. I think that he secretly knew and that was what caused the display in the garden; he desperately forced himself to feel the way he longed to. It would be a blatant lie to tell you that I too didn't force myself to be consumed by the passion of his kiss. But that flame withered so

quickly I just went limp with disappointment. He refused to believe and tried to force it, I think he is still bewildered with disappointment that the realization of it won't hit him for a while. Speaking of reality I can barely hold this pen, my hand is shaking profusely, I think the sheer magnitude of tonight has finally hit me too as I have recounted it for myself.

Let my tears be my bed fellow tonight as I drift into a restless slumber, I hope to wake to a more pleasant morrow.

Kisses always yours,

Nina

Waking far more exhausted than she felt when she went to sleep Nina requests her breakfast be served in bed. As the door opens Nina sees Vanessa bringing it in herself, smiling from ear to ear. Knowing full well the level of interrogation to ensue Nina attempts to hide under the voluminous covers. Vanessa places the tray on the bedside table and pulls the covers back, with her hands on her hips she asks "What ever happened last night, we searched for you and Nicki

and you were nowhere to be found! This morn I hear his coach leaving, with no word on why."

Nina sits up arranging the covers just to avoid Vanessa's gaze "There is business he needed to attend to, he promised to return for the next ball."

Skeptical Vanessa peers closer "Is that is all?"

With her fists on her hips she demands "Nicolette Martin what happened last night? Where ever did you disappear off to, how did you make your way home? Why did you not tell anyone of your whereabouts!!!?"

As Vanessa continues to question her Nina's eyes well up with tears "I am sorry it all happened so quickly."

"Oh no do not cry my love, it is all right" Vanessa attempts to comfort her as worry crinkles her brow.

Starting at the beginning Nina recounts the events the past evening. Vanessa is shocked speechless, staring at Nina dumbfounded. As the story comes to an end Vanessa pulls Nina into a tight hug, attempting to comfort the poor girl.

Turning to towards Olivia "Call the Duke I wish to speak to my husband at once, that fiend needs to be taught a lesson once and for all."

Returning her attentions to a calmer Nina she continues "If I only knew I would have NEVER allowed him to be in your presence."

"No Vanessa it is all right I ..." she smiles "I think I inflicted enough damage to his ego."

Smiling at the thought Vanessa pushes the mussed hair out of Nina's face, she looks her in the eye "Yes I am sure you did my love, but there is a code that is followed and he has crossed this line more than once. We cannot turn a blind eye to it any longer."

"I hate to ask my dear, how did Nicki handle all of this?"

"He tried to put up a strong facade but I know he is battling with it. I have a sneaking suspicion that his need to leave has more to do with the realization of the truth than his business. He will need time away to clear his head, I am certain he will return, I need to believe he will return."

“Nicki is one of the greatest men I have ever know” in a whisper and a smile upon her lips she continues “do not tell Decklyn I sometimes think he is a better man than the one I married” both women laugh.

“There is no doubt in my mind that he will return and he will treat you no different. He just needs time to make his heart realize what his mind now knows.”

Leaving Nina to get herself ready for the day Vanessa goes to inform Decklyn of Christoff’s deplorable actions. Finding her husband in the study she conveys last night’s happenings to him. Blinded by rage he bellows for his horse to be readied and he leaves.

Nina makes her way down just as he is walking out the door.

“Decklyn” she calls out to him but he is too focused to hear her. She rushes down the stairs as she reaches the landing he is already on his horse galloping away.

Vanessa comes to her side “Fret not my dear all will be well. I just wish Nicki or even Steven were able to accompany him.”

“What will he do?”

“That is men’s business; let’s leave it up to them.”

Nervously Nina continues her day anxiously waiting for Decklyn’s return.

Decklyn walks in an hour just before dinner, he goes to clean himself up and joins them in the dining room. Once dinner is done the children are taken by the nanny to their rooms and only the adults remain.

Decklyn stands and walks to the window running his hand through his hair, and then back down his face. As his hand drops from his mouth he turns towards Nina and begins “First and foremost I wish to apologize to you Nicolette, as your host it was my duty to keep you safe. I am certain that due to my warm reception of Christoff into our company, you trusted him all the more, and he took advantage of that. In prior years there were rumors, though nothing was ever substantiated, most likely due to the fact he had the victims disappear. Moreover, most of the ladies who dared to speak up were those of rather questionable moral standing or those of a lower status that appear to have been looking for a wealthy benefactor.”

Turning away from them he continues "I have had a tête à tête with Christoff and you should be expecting an apology from him to say the least. Furthermore, you will not find him in your presence ever again."

"Thank you" she whispers as she walks up to him and gives him a hug "I bid you a good night" and she takes her leave.

Exhausted Nina is fast asleep as soon as her head hits the pillow.

Nina wakes up early; she is roused from her slumber by the happy chirping of birds. It looks like a warm beautiful spring day, every day it is warmer and warmer it does seem that summer is just around the bend.

Chipper she jumps out of bed ready for a new day, as she dresses she remembers it has been a while since she spent time with Josephine and Thian. She decides today she will devote herself to them.

For the first time she is early to breakfast, as the family files in she is warmly greeted by all, especially the children.

Josephine is surprisingly the last to come to her, "Nina will you play with us today? It has been so long since you have spent any time with me."

Crossing her arms and pouting "You took Thian out for play and not me" she punctuates the "me" with a stomp of her little dainty foot.

Nina can't help but laugh at the sweet girl's attempt at anger.

"Josephine…" Vanessa exclaims in shock "is that any way…"but before she can finish, her anger is quickly dissolved into a fit of laughter same as Nina's.

Josephine's mouth is agape at the behavior of the adults.

Seeing that they are hurting her feelings, Nina wipes her tears and eases herself out of her chair to be at the child's eye level.

"My darling… it was not a play date that I had with Thian; he was teaching me to ride and since you still do not ride my dear, how pray tell would you have been able to join us?"

“Well I…w” tongue tied she stutters.

Nina continues “Regardless Josephine we will be spending loads of time together, well at least until the days before the next ball. So I expect you and Thian to think of all the fun things you wish for us to do.”

Clapping her hands excitedly Josephine rushes to her seat already deep in contemplation as she eats her breakfast which has already gotten cold.

The rest of the meal goes on without much excitement. Getting ready to leave Vanessa ask Nina to join her for a walk.

Pulling a letter out of her pocket once they are on the veranda Vanessa hands it to Nina. Her face ashen Nina gingerly takes the letter scared of what she will find within its folds.

“Nina, are you well?”

Not looking up from the letter Vanessa realizes she believes the letter is a devastating note from Nicki.

Stopping she takes Nina by the hands, crushing the letter in process. Taking her other hand she lifts

Nina's chin so that she is able to gaze into the poor girl's tormented eyes.

"My dear calm yourself it is only a note from Evangeline. She has had tremendous success with her dresses since you have lent your masterful eye to her designs. Overwhelmed she has asked that I and the Duke to try to persuade you to join her in a new business endeavor."

Opening the envelope she sees Evangeline's scripted proposal of the business venture.

Exhaling deeply she grips the letter to her chest and leans her head against the shaded coolness of the terrace wall.

"Oh thank goodness, I do no think I could handle any more ill gotten news. I feared it was a goodbye letter from Nicki."

"Oh no love" she says taking Nina's face unto her palm, moving the fallen tresses away from her face "he would never say goodbye to you in such a way. He is a good and honorable man, and moreover he is a greatest friend anyone could ever ask for, remember

that always" nodding Nina agrees. Looking back at the letter she turns it over to Vanessa.

"Am I reading this correctly?"

Smiling Vanessa nods "You may thank Decklyn for negotiating on your behalf, though knowing your worth Evangeline did not offer much opposition. This will offer you financial freedom to do as you please."

"Yes and firstly I wish to reimburse you for your generosity."

Shaking her head "Do not even waste your breath; we will not accept a pence."

Pointing to the children "Those silly gooses are the single way for you to reimburse us. Bestow upon them your knowledge and open their eyes to the possibilities of the world."

"That I can most certainly do" she concedes.

Finally setting their sights on Nina the children run over and whisk her away from their mother.

"Evangeline is expecting you tomorrow for high noon tea, to discuss further." Vanessa yells out.

Nina yelps back "will do" before she is pulled into a competitive run with the children.

Slowing down she takes a deep breath before collapsing on to the grass with a sigh of relief. The children collapse beside her, turning to Josephine she begins to tickle her, Thian joins her in the torture of a screaming and laughing Josephine. It isn't long before they turn on Thian and then on Nina.

The merriment is carried by the soft breeze to Vanessa's ears, she smiles to herself and looks up at her handsome husband. He smiles reaching for her, rising she gives him her hand; mischievously he smiles as he pulls her towards him.

Landing in his lap with a yelp "Why Mr. Wakefield, this is hardly proper behavior for a Duke."

Nuzzling her neck he whispers "Mmmm…the benefit of being a Duke my love is that you are the one to make the rules. And I say it is more than appropriate to seduce your wife on a lazy afternoon."

Nestling into his embrace she takes his hand in hers "Nina was speechless when I told her of your

negotiations with Evangeline" she absentmindedly plays with his fingers intertwining them with hers.

"I was glad to help, though I was shocked Evangeline was willing to accept most of my conditions. Nicolette must be an amazing seamstress."

Looking down at his wife he continues "She is a rather peculiar girl do you not think my love; tell me again how ever did you befriended her?"

"That old story" she laughs nervously.

"She is much too different, I have been to the Americas and she is unlike any woman that I ever met there or anywhere really."

Sitting up she harps "Oh so you are well informed when it comes to American women, are you now?!?"

Pulling her back down into his embrace he showers her with kisses until she giggles. Calming down she continues "She is just worldly; her family has traveled a great deal. Her life has been hard forcing her to grow wise beyond her years. Hence, she is not the common lackadaisical woman you would come across. Wishing to better herself she has studied much

and has become a rather learned woman, her knowledge far surpasses all women I know of and most men for that matter. That is why I have her spending time with the children, hoping she can bring out in them the curiosity of the world."

"But still…"

"But nothing my dear, let us enjoy the blissful peace of this glorious day" as she snuggles in deeper into his embrace.

Sensing the conversation has been put to rest moreover, knowing not to press Vanessa when she has already deemed the discussion final, he yields. But not for long, there is just something about the girl that gnaws at him, something is just not right 'I will be damned if I don't get to the bottom of this conundrum' he thinks to himself, as he watches Nina walk back with the children in tow.

Dear D,

What a day! Evangeline has asked me to partner up with her, I don't know all the details but it looks to be quite a solid arrangement, thanks to Decklyn. I must

thank him tomorrow, more and more I see him for the good and honorable man that Vanessa fell in love with, and because of that, the fact that he doesn't know still gnaws at me. I hate that Vanessa wants to see how long it will take him to realize it, but I don't think it's fair, esp. now when he went above and beyond. We will have to revisit this issue sooner than later. As of late he seems a bit suspicious, he looks at me in a strange way. No not in a creeper way, he thankfully (or is it unfortunately LOL he is a total hottie) has eyes only for his wife, not that one could blame him. It's more a look of suspicion and ehh... I don't know but it won't be long before he figures it out and I don't want him to be angry that he wasn't told from the beginning.

An update on mission "Summer of 2009" Ephraim is continuing with the testing phase, and he is getting bolder and bolder. Yesterday he actually stuck his hand into the void, his whole hand just disappeared, I totally freaked out praying 'oh please don't lose it'. With a grin upon his face he managed to pull out some garbage, thank God for litter bugs. The candy wrappers looked fairly new as they were not too

weathered and the expiration dates were not too far beyond the time I disappeared, so I think them to be fairly fresh. Upon the discovery Ephraim and I hypostasized that future and the past (which I am currently in) run parallel to one another and the same amount of time has passed in both. Of course this is just a theory, but being that also the newspapers bits we extracted were dated circa the time of my disappearance, as well a few bits were from two weeks ago gives me hope that I will manage to return to my own time, without losing years or heaven forbid decades. For now he thinks that the worm hole is keeping steady, it has not expanded or contracted, he has been taking careful measurements of it to make sure I still have an appropriate window of time to return without risking my life. I asked him when I can go through and he refuses to even address the topic. He mentioned to me that there is some volatility and that putting his own hand into it was not too smart. Since yesterday he has been complaining of pains in it, which has got me worried. I am hoping that what pains him is a result of him slipping and falling on his wrist whilst trying to catch Mr. Rabbit (his furry

assistant) who is not too keen on going into the void. He doesn't know I saw this and I think he is trying to keep me away from the tree and the possibility of slipping through the worm hole while he isn't there to witness it.

Well that is all for today.

Kisses,

Nina

Waking later than usual Nina has just enough time for a quick break of fast before she has to gathers her drawings and notes from her room and ready herself for a her visit to Evangeline's. The coach comes early of course; Evangeline is nothing if not a stickler for punctuality, gathering the last of her things Nina rushes out the door and into the coach. Her huffing and puffing earns her a smile from the driver and footman, in her defense she quips "You are early!"

"The Madame requested it to be so; my apologies for not letting you know sooner, Mademoiselle."

"It is all right, I should have known she would do this." She says with a laugh which the driver and footman

join her in. The rest of the ride is uneventful until they reach the shop. Evangeline is standing outside the door checking her pocket watch tapping her foot impatiently.

"Not subtle is she gentlemen?"

The footman whispers behind her "No that she is not, but she is fair in her most stringent warnings."

"I gather I will have to break her in and calm her, perhaps we can teach that old dog new tricks, what do you say lads?"

"Tis your hide m'lady, t'will be interesting to see who breaks whom first." Skeptically the driver responds in hushed tones before making a stop before the impatient Evangeline, who upon seeing them retreats into the shop.

Descending from the coach Nina makes her way in and proceeds to the back of the shop to Evangeline's office.

"Il était temps (it's about time)!"

"Oh Evangeline, ne soyez pas un tel rabat-joie (don't be a party pooper)! I am early if anything.

“Sans importance (unimportant)” Evangeline waives the argument away with a simple flick of her wrist.

“Let us get to the matter at hand” chuckles Nina. Pulling out the note she continues “This is very generous of you.”

“Oui, well the Duke drives a hard bargain” grinning she goes on “truth be told I would have gladly paid more but what is done is done my dear.”

They continue ironing out the last few points of the contract and they both sign off on it.

Upon completion they toast “To life and happiness!”

Now let us get back to business.

Pulling out some of her sketches Nina explains them to Evangeline who smiles at the new life Nina has breathed into her designs. With a few alterations to the originals Evangeline turns them over to the seamstress to begin production.

“Do you wish to see the designs I have made for Fiona’s dress?”

“Oh yes please” Evangeline pulls out a drawing of an emerald green off the shoulder dress sprinkled with pearls of various sizes along the bodice.

“It is a lovely design Evangeline, though do you not think that the emerald green is far too stark a color against her pail complexion, perhaps something a shade or two softer.”

“Hmmm… perhaps, let me see what I have that might be more suitable.”

After they scrutinize all the shades of green they agree on a soft pastel green a much perkier pretty color more befitting a young vivacious girl. A few more adjustments to the design and they both agree it is a work of art.

They start on a new dress, just as they finish a maid brings in their tea. Before Nina knows it is time for her to go.

“Take these designs with you make whatever changes you deem necessary and send them back. Also do you remember Lady Stark and Contessa de Barbarac from the past ball?”

“No truth be told I am far better with faces then I am with names, but if you describe them I will do my best to design something befitting.”

And with that she is off as the footman closes the door to her carriage he informs her “Mademoiselle we will be making a short stop to deliver a package if you do not mind.”

“Oh not at all it will give me the opportunity to see more of the city.”

Off we go then.” The driver bellows.

In order to reach their destination they pass through the slums a sad sight that bewilders Nina. Whilst passing a rather decrepit part of town Nina is intrigued by a building which sticks out like a sore thumb. The building is a gorgeous gothic structure though it is evident that it has being badly kept up. In and out of it stream children of all ages. Tapping in the glass Nina inquires “What is that building?”

“That Miss is the orphanage, a sad sight really.”

“Why pray tell?”

“It is rumored that Mrs. Perkins takes advantage of those poor ragamuffins. She makes them slave away in order to earn their keep. Tiz better than having them loiter the streets but not by much.”

“What does she have them do?”

“Various odds and ends”

The footman chimes in “The poor dears are slave labor they say.”

“But is there no one that could be of help to them?”

Why does the government not do something about it?”

“She keeps them ragamuffin off the streets so no one really cares how it is that she does it.”

“Do not fret Miss no need to concern yourself with the misfortunes of a few.”

“But they are only children; it is so sad that no one take care for the most unfortunate.” She responds in a whisper.

“Oh no Mademoiselle some like the Duke and the Duchess take great interest and do more than required

or expected, but there is so much poverty, not all can be helped" says the driver.

"Hmmm… yes well we shall see what can be done about that" she says fervently.

"Is it all right that we stop of at the home of Lady Gertrude Parish I wish to drop off a note?"

"Of course Mademoiselle we will be there shortly."

Dropping off the package for Evangeline their next stop is Fiona's home.

They come to a stop and the footman lowers the step assisting her out of the coach, before she can even knock on the door the butler opens it.

"Good day Madame."

"Good day, can you please give this note to Lady Dartmouth."

"Of course, do you wish to enter and wait for the Miss."

"Oh no, it is all right I just wished to deliver the note, I shall see her soon enough." She smiles and turns to leave.

Before she knows it she is pulling into the grounds of Crescentferd, as she exits the coach she is practically tackled by Josephine.

"You have returned! Shall we play now?"

"Play no. We will be continuing your studies young lady. So off you go and fetch Thian and meet me in the gardens. I just wish to change into something more suitable for the ruckus that is sure to ensue."

As Josephine rushes off to find her brother Nina makes her way to her chambers.

Olivia is waiting for her ready with her day dress and all its "modern day" restraints. Looking at the corset Nina frowns, "Livy I do not wish to wear those today".

"But Miss it is most improper not to not wear undergarments."

"Fret not I have something better." Nina walks over to her closet opens her bag and pulls out her black bra with the more functional matching panties.

Olivia shocked looks over the garments "What in heaven's are those?"

“Do you like them? It is something I have been working on with Madame Soliegh. They are less cumbersome and still provide you with enough modesty that no one would be the wiser you are not wearing all that regalia” she points to the 1800’s undergarments.

“Very pretty Miss, the lace on the bustier is beautiful, is it French?”

Nina giggles inwardly “Mmmm.. yes.” She goes behind the modesty screen to change, offering Olivia the old dress in exchange for the fresh one. She steps out and Olivia buttons it up for her.

Twirling Nina asks “Can you tell I am not wearing all of that underneath?” she says pointing to the discarded undergarments on her bed.

“No most curiously not Miss.” Olivia smiles.

“Excellent now off I go, I best not keep those two waiting.”

Walking down the steps she is relieved that she can actually breathe for a change. ‘I think I will definitely stop wearing those ridiculous contraptions and opt for

this. Though I think I will also have to show these to Evangeline and see how we can start producing these before I completely wear them out.'

As she exits the manor she finds the siblings bickering.

"Stop it the two of you" she chastises both "can you not for one moment stop and act proper".

"But..."Thian tries to explain.

Shaking her head "No, I care not for your excuses, you must cease this behavior at once, you are both far too old for this constant bickering, whatever will your mother think. Do you wish to be sent off to boarding school in order to learn proper manners? And you" she turns to Josephine "you must to lean to act like a lady. I know it is tempting to just run amuck but you have great responsibility to your heritage. You are the ones that all others will be measured up to. You must try my darlings, now kiss and make up, and make it genuine or I will have you march up the stairs and we will have no lessons today." They each apologize to the other and hug for good measure.

Feeling bad for scolding them so, Nina takes each by hand and begins her lessons as they walk through the meadow towards the lake. Once upon the shores of the lake she instructs the children to find specimens for their science lessons. Nina laughs as Josephine tries to catch a dwarf frog which is deftly escaping her grasp.

“Thian go and help your sister” she manages between wholehearted giggles.

She watches them team up against the frightened animal, she lifts her skirts getting ready to run over to help them.

“Oh no you don’t you minx!” she hears from behind her but before she can turn to see who it is, arms wrap around her waist bringing her roughly against a strong frame.

Panicked Nina struggles against her assailant, the fear of that night sweeps over her but instead of paralyzing her it spurs her adrenalin.

“Let me go this instant or you will sorely regret it” she whispers through her clenched teeth not wanting to alarm the children.

Burying his face into her hair, his lips trail down until they are pressed against her neck, softly he whispers “And if I do not what will you do my lovely?”

His hands begin to roam her body in a most intimate manner, shocked Nina inhales sharply.

“We got him!” the children shout in excitement. As they turn towards Nina confusion paints their faces, Thian’s face contorts in anger he starts to move towards her, Josephine is hiding behind him, seeing this Nina shouts at them “No, RUN!!”

“But…!” Thian tries to argue she yells at him “Run home NOW!” As the children run away her thoughts return to her assailant. She elbows him as hard as she can into his solar plexus the sheer force of the blow lurches him forward, she head-butts him in the face with the back of her head and steps as hard as she can on his instep. From utter surprise and pain he stumbles letting her go, she turns to face him, he extends his hand towards her, grabbing it she turns

her back to him once again and flips him over her shoulder.

He yells out in surprise, the children stop in their tracks.

Thian turns just as Nina flip the man over her shoulder. As he lands he reaches his hand toward the children. Thian begins to run towards the two with Josephine in tow.

"No Nina!" he yells as Nina crouches over the man her knee pressed firmly on his chest as she braces his arms above his head using all her body weight on keeping him down.

A movement out of the corner of her eye draws her attention, she sees the children running back towards her. With the blood rushing in her ears she hears not what Thian and Josephine are yelling.

Finally she looks at the man below her. "Www..who are you?"

Thian reaches her first and looks at the man under her "Uncle Steven?"

Looking from Nina to his nephew he smiles "Hello Thian, can you please ask her to let me up."

Turning towards Nina he continues "I am so sorry, please."

Josephine finally reaches them and hearing her uncle's voice rushes towards him laying herself across his chest.

Nina shocked and embarrassed lets go of him, and allows the children to help him into a sitting position. Devastated and thoroughly embarrassed Nina is at loss for words. Looking at the man she finally see the family resemblance, the raven hair, the startling piercing blue eyes, he is taller and broader than Decklyn but not as tall as Nicky.

"I..I... I am so sorry" she whispers as she steps towards them. Josephine has once again thrown herself at her Uncle forcing him on his back. Instead of reprimanding her for her over enthusiastic embrace he grabs Thian as well and they begin to roll on the grass.

Not being able to contain herself Nina smiles at the heartwarming sight, until she notices that Steven has a gash on the side of his head which has now begun to bleed.

She steps over to them worriedly "Sir I am so sorry for hurting you, please accept my most sincere apology."

Looking at her he stops the play with the children, his smile is infectious even roughed up he is devastatingly handsome. She is taken back by the humor in his eyes and the playful smile adorning his lips.

"Nonsense it is I who must beg for your forgiveness, I was foolhardy to approach you in such a way. Though I must say I am glad to know that the children have someone such as yourself to watch over them."

He goes to get up his eyes never leaving her face, he stumbles but Nina is quick to come to his assistance.

"Uncle you are bleeding!" yelps Josephine.

Touching the warm spot on his forehead he looks down at his fingers "Thus appears that I am."

“Come have a seat here under the tree and I will bandage it for you.” She leads him over to the weeping willow and helps him sit on the bench. Lifting her skirts she rips off a generous piece from her petticoat, ripping it in two once again she instructs Thian to wet the piece in the stream and come back quickly.

Looking over his wound Nina comments “It does not seem to be a deep cut but we will need to clean and bandage it before we can return.”

Just as he is about to respond Thian returns and she quickly begins cleaning the wound. Nina smiles as she watches him wince but not complain once. “Does it hurt Sir?” she asks innocently.

“Hmmmm… No of course not it is just a scratch.” He answers as he winces once more.

“Mmm… yes of course” she smiles down at him and he chuckles with her.

The children, especially Josephine who is climbing into his lap are impeding her attempts to stop the bleeding.

“Children why don’t you go and play while I help your uncle.” Before Josephine can rebuttal “Josephine he

isn't going to be leaving, there will be plenty of time to speak to your Uncle upon our return to the manor. Now go and play for a bit before we have to go back."

"Come on Josephine let's see if we can catch that frog once again" Thian says excitedly as he grabs his sisters hand and drags her away.

"Just stay away from the edge of the lake you two "yells Nina after them.

"They will be alight" says Steven bringing her attentions back to him.

"Yes I am sure they will; now let us see if we can get this to stop bleeding".

After what seems like an eternity to Nina the wound is cleaned and bandaged. Admiring her handy work she turns away from Steven "I am going to wash my hands in the stream."

While washing her hands she splashes some cold water on to her face which she is sure is a flush due to his watchful eyes which did not leave her face as she tended to his wound. 'Get a hold of yourself Nina' she reprimands herself.

Composing herself she returns and sits herself next to him, avoiding his gaze she looks forward toward the meadow.

“I do not believe we have been formally introduced” he quips.

“No we have not” she responds as she turns to look at him.

He attempts to stand but begins to sway as he rises from the bench, Nina reaches out to help him, he grabs both her hands until he steadies himself. Looking at her he smiles, let’s go of her hands and takes a bow “ Stephen Wakefield Earl of Glenmore at your service Miss.”

Smiling she bows her head in acknowledgement “It is a pleasure to meet you Earl of Glenmore. I am Miss Nicolette Martin.”

“No Miss Martin it is my great pleasure.” He takes her hand and kisses the top of it.

She looks away smiling; gently she extricates her hand from his.

A sound of creaking boards attracts her attention she looks over to the lake only to see the children running on the dilapidated dock. Nina rises; as she does she watches the dock begin to sway slowly buckling under the weight of the children.

"STOP!" she shouts as she gathers her skirts and begins to run toward them with the Earl just on her heals.

Josephine and Thian stop in their tracks and the realization hits them that they are in danger.

"Nina!" Josephine screams out.

"DO NOT MOVE, I am coming!" The children begin to walk backward slowly and the deck starts to pitch forward as it detaches itself from the shoreline, folding parallel to the deeper part of the lake.

Josephine screams as she holds tightly to Thian, the dock sinks deeper into the waters taking the children down with it.

"NO…" screams Nina as she reaches the foothold of the dock. She heard Steven behind her trying to keep up yell out "Josephine does not know how to swim!"

“Oh God” she whispers as his words finally register, without thinking she dives head first off what is left of the dock.

Coming up she yells out to Steven “No do not come in stay on shore, I will pass the children to you.”

Turning back to the children she sees Thian trying to help keep a panicked and splashing Josephine above water. Her thrashing is bringing them both under, the boys words are of no comfort to the small child.

She yells to Josephine but her words fall on to deaf ears, but they do reach Steven who is relieved to see her swimming towards them.

“Can you swim ashore Thian?” she yells to him.

“I …can’t …leave Josephine” he says as he tries to keep his and Josephine’s heads out of the water. The thrashing about is exhausting him.

“I am here let her go, you swim back to the shore while you still have enough energy to do so on your own accord.”

“But…” he stammers.

“No buts GO!” she states adamantly.

“Nooooo…” screams Josephine.

Reaching out for the little girl, Nina takes hold of her, trying to calm her down, but is suppressed by the strength the little girl.

“Jojo…honey, STOP!!! Josephine STOP this thrashing at once or you will drown us both!!”

Her words fall once again on deaf ears as Josephine is far too hysterical to hear anything.

‘You have left me no choice’ *she whispers as she slaps Josephine and let’s go of her.*

Shocked Josephine stops, staring blankly at Nina, her adrenalin spent she begins to sink below the surface.

“NO…” she screams as Nina takes a breath and dives under.

Upon the shore Steven is holding back Thian who is trying to escape his grasp to jump back in after his sister “Give her a moment, she will reach her” he whispers trying to restrain the boy.

Under the water Nina sees Josephine sinking into the depths, she dodges the debris of dead trees and branches and grabs a hold of the girl and begins to drag her back up.

As they break the surface Josephine opens her eyes and takes a huge breath to Nina's relief. Cheering erupts from the shore earning a smile from both Nina and Josephine.

"Now my love lay back and I will bring us ashore. " Josephine concedes and Nina wraps her left arm around her chest and begins to swim. They move not a few feet when Nina is jerked under, she automatically lets go of Josephine who begins to panic once again.

"Nina! NINA!!"

Nina comes up a few feet away from her almost where they started. Swimming towards the girl once again she is brought to a stop as she nears the child.

Nina pulls but to no avail, she extends her hand to Josephine who takes it desperately Nina pulls Josephine towards her.

“My dress it is caught on the debris just under here. I will try to free myself.” She yells to those on shore.

Turning back to Josephine she says calmly “Come here, do you feel the branch with your feet.” Grabbing her leg she positions them on top of the branch “Yes, all right now move your hands like this upon the surface of the water to keep your feet balanced upon it.”

“No Nina” yelps Josephine unwilling to let go of her.

“You must my love, I need to free myself otherwise we will be stuck here for some time, and it is getting late” she says pointing up to the sky which has begun to darken with the setting of the sun behind the tree tops.

“Now lets us try let me see how you can balance yourself.” She encourages her with a smile.

Josephine lets go and follows Nina’s instructions, she manages to balance herself quite well earning a beaming smile from Nina. “I will be right here do not fret all right, I am going to dive under and be back up before you know it.”

On the count of three she goes under, pulling herself towards the entanglement of branches which has

gotten a hold of the bottom of her dress. The light is too low and she is unable to see well in the murky waters, she is forced to feel her way to freedom. Unable to untangle the mess she tries to rip the dress but is unable to gather enough momentum to tear the material. Her air supply dwindling she lets go and heads back up to the surface, she is rewarded with a smile for a relieved Josephine who lunges herself back on to Nina.

Holding her at arm's length "No my dear I must go back down, on to the branch you go" she says as she perches her back on to her spot.

"How are you fairing over there?" she hears Steven bellow from the shore.

"My dress is tangled, I am going to try again to untangle myself.

"You must be getting tired I am coming in to help" he bellows back as he begins to walk to the water's edge.

"No, we are well enough, aren't we Josephine."

"Yes we are, look Uncle I am swimming" she grins proudly.

“You hit your head, the last thing I need is to be saving you too, so please just be patient we will be joining you soon enough.”

“Very well but best hurry as the sun is beginning to set.”

“Alright, here I go again, one, two” she takes a deep breath “three” and she is back under.

‘Darn this ridiculous bondage they call clothes, it’s a miracle I haven’t drowned from the sheer heaviness of the material. There is no way I can untangle this without seeing what is caught, I have had enough of this.’ *She thinks to herself.*

Popping back up she smiles at Josephine “Just a bit longer and we will be swimming back.”

Curiously Josephine looks at her “What are you to do?”

“I cannot free the dress so I am going to free myself of the dress.”

“Ohhh…but it is… what will you wear?” Josephine questions.

“Shhh… it is to be our little secret, well at least until we reach the edge, it is the only way.”

First she undoes the cuffs, keeping herself under the surface of the water to make the dress fill out and give her more wiggle room. Slowly she pulls her arms into the dress and begins to turn it until the buttons are in the front, then she puts her hands back into the sleeves and unbuttons just enough buttons to maneuver herself out of the dress.

“Ahhh…” she exhales as the dress glides off and sinks into the depths.

“Free at last!!” she smiles at Josephine, nods her head and Josephine takes a leap off the branch landing in her arms. Flipping her on her back she tows them both back to shore.

A cheer erupts from what is left of the dock, earning a giggle from Josephine.

Nina lifts Josephine up out of the water and hands her over to the waiting arms of Steven, he hugs the child to his chest and turns back to reunite her with her brother.

Nina continues on swimming her way to the edge of the lake not wanting to get out of the water from the dock.

As Steven reaches the anxious Thian Nina is able to touch the lake bottom, the hesitant Nina walks the rest of the way out of the water.

Thian's gaze is fixated beyond his uncles shoulder, Josephine giggles at the stunned Thian. Steven turns to see what has shocked his nephew.

His own jaw drops as Nina walks on, more and more of her is revealed as the water recedes. The sun filtering through the trees at her back blinds them for a moment but outlines her body perfectly. Like Botticelli's Venus she walks out of the water standing before them with nothing on but her bra and panties.

Nervously she tries to cover herself up, she begins to blush under the watchful eye of Seven who has yet to even take a breath as his eyes roam her body. Finally his eyes reach her face and he snaps out of it, and stammers "umm…I … what happened to your dress?"

“I could not free it so I left it at the bottom of the lake; I am a bit cold do you mind giving me your jacket?”

“Yes, yes of course, my apologies, Thian avert your eyes it is improper to stare.”

He takes off his jacket and drapes it around her shoulders, all the while unable to take his eyes off her.

“And is it proper for you to stare, Sir?” she whispers staring into his eyes.

“I…well, I…” he stammers unable to respond.

Looking down at herself she sees the short waist coat is barely covering her upper thighs.

“Ummm… this is not much better is it?” she smiles and looks up at Steven “May we trade Sir, the coat for your shirt, it will be much longer and cover up more of me. I am rather hesitant to walk into the manor half naked.”

“Yes of course” he blindly begins to unbutton his shirt.

‘Now let’s watch you undress, Mr. Googly eyes hmmm…’ she thinks inwardly as she watches him unbutton his shirt with a justified satisfaction, which

quickly becomes an all together different feeling with each button exposing more and more skin.

‘Oh, oh…’ she thinks to herself as a faint heat begins to travel up to her cheeks. Bringing her eyes back up to his face she unabashed maintains eye contact refusing to stoop to his level.

He holds out the shirt and she takes it reluctantly giving him back his coat.

Realizing the impropriety of the situation he turns his back to her and allows her to dress. Gathering the children he waits for her to join them for their journey back.

Buttoning the last button she takes Josephine’s waiting hand and they walk to the mansion, Thian and Steven in the front and Nina and Josephine following directly behind them.

As they near the mansion the children let go and run off leaving the adults in an uncomfortable silence.

Steven clears his throat “I wish to apologize for what happened back there. In no way did I mean to be so crude I hope that you can forgive me, it was just that

I was shocked that you… came out of the waters sans dress.”

“Your apology accepted; let us not speak of this anymore. I wish to put the whole incident behind us.” Nina says as a faint blush creeps up to her cheeks.

“I concur” he replies with a smile on his dashing face as he steals a glance at her.

Without even turning to look at him she reprimands him “Eyes forward Mr. Wakefield, or you will force me lay you on your back once more.”

Shaking his head he smiles even broader holding up his hands in surrender “I promise to be good.”

“Mmmmhmmmm…” she replies with a playful smile upon her lips.

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favorite, he is sooo… (sigh)… dreamy. If I was Nina I would have picked him hands down. But when faced with possibility of true love or just a genuine fondness for someone you could grow to love, who would you choose? Nina's story is very complicated, just when you think you know where its going, here comes a curve ball that just spins the story into a completely different direction. But don't feel bad for Nicki his story I promise to write next. I just can't start now, not untill this one is over, my plan is to pick up right where this one ends, giving you a seemless transition into the world of Nicki, im so excited, I just want him to get the love that he deserves. My favorite thing about him is how he falls in love with all these women with such whole hearted abandon. He holds nothing back, his passion burns so bright only to be extinguished in such a devestating way, but he just picks himself up and keeps searching. Got to love a man who just doesn't give up.

So please let me know what you think so far, ask questions, point out mistakes or tell me your predictions what do you think will happen next?

As always Kisses JoJo!!!

Chapter 7

At Water's Edge - Chapter 10

Ok here it is as promised, this is my unedited draft so be kind in your comments. I hope that you like it, it isn't as long as my usual chapters but it is a good filler chapter. It's a get to know the family chapter, and a bit of see Nina squirm chapter. Ch 11 I think you will like as Nicki will be coming back to do what he does best, drive the Wakefield men crazy. So be patient with me I am hoping to give you at least one chapter a month, I know that sounds like not enough but as someone said to be you can't rush art (Alora) LOL and I will be plunged into busy season again and I won't have as much time to write but for you I will

of course do my best to stick to my little self imposed deadline.

Just a little update those of you who voted thank you very much I will be changing the name of Thian back to Tristan and will be doing so over the next few days so please be patient with me.

Goodnight my loves, leave me a few comments and votes to pleasantly wake up to.

Kisses,

JoJo

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are even at the midpoint of the stairs Nina is attacked by a flustered Olivia already armed with a warm wool blanket. She lets go of Stevens hand with an apologetic look on her face and is rewards with a sheepish grin. As she retreats with Olivia who like a mother hen is a cluck with worry, the Dowager comes running practically flinging herself at Steven, who is obviously uncomfortable with the attention she has bestowed upon him.

"Steven my darling boy, oh look at you!" she yelps excitedly. After a few minutes she lets him out of her grasp long enough to really look at him and she finally notices the makeshift bandages wrapped about his head, ashen she moves in closer to inspect the wound.

"However were you injured, why would you go out into the meadow if you were hurt!" the Dowager not letting anyone have a word in edgewise continues to spew questions.

"Mother please I am fine, stop fussing; really it is merely a scratch."

"We must call the doctor, call Nathaniel I will not sleep in constant worry unless you are examined properly."

“Vanessa, Vanessa!!!” calls out the Dowager “we must call on Nathaniel quickly!!”

Stepping around his frantic mother, Declyn gives Steven a brotherly hug.

“Good to see you again bother, you have strayed for far too long” he says loud enough for all to hear “coming to us injured will cause mother to fret over you all the more now” he whispers between wholehearted chuckles “if that was your plan it worked marvelously”.

“Oh yes you know how I revel when I am the sole recipient of our mothers attention.” Under his breath he continues only for Decklyn to hear “That is why my visits are so far and few in between.”

Pulling on his bandage Decklyn continues with a laugh “You have gotten soft if you let a mere wisp of a girl pummel you so, we Wakefield men have a reputation to uphold.”

“Hmmm… some reputation” a smiling Vanessa declares as she embraces her brother in law “let us call a spade a spade boys because when it comes to a

beautiful women you Wakefield's fall head over heels, isn't that what happened Steven?"

"My heals were well over my head" a laughing Steven replies matter-a-factly.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha!!" Vanessa exaggerates a laugh "Dear bother-in-law you surely know how to make an entrance. I swear you will be the death of her." She continues as all three turn to see the Dowager calling to every staff in the household to fetch the Doctor.

Taking him by the hand she continues in whisper "Perhaps if you visited more often she wouldn't fret over you so. You know very well the longer you stay away, the worse her dotting is once you finally grace us with your presence."

"Yes I am quite aware." He says with a smile.

"Now whatever happened out there? I have yet to speak to Nina moreover, what shall we tell mother dearest?"

"Yes brother do enlighten us" Deckly eggs on.

Just as he is about to recount his story the Dowager comes and drags him off so that he may rest before his visit with the doctor, Steven apologetically looks back at the two.

Decklyn whispers just loud for Steven to hear "It is best not to resist, the penance for disobedience is far worse of a sentence."

Swatting his arm Vanessa apprises him that she is going to check on Nina and the children.

Back in her room Nina is basking in the warmth of her bath, just as she is about to slip into slumber Olivia walks in pulls over the stool and begins to wash her hair.

"You gave us a fright Miss, when the children came a running wet and disheveled." She shakes her head.

Patting her hand Nina smiles "It was nothing I am just glad everyone is well."

"But what of the Earl Miss? How was he hurt?"

Nina recounts the story which has Olivia in stitches "Oh Miss you really are something else, most ladies

would have thrown themselves at him not thrown him to the ground. Oh I wish I could have been there to see it."

"He was quite surprised I can tell you that, serves him right to take such liberties."

"He should be ashamed, why I know not what would have possessed him to do what he had done Miss, the Earl has always been a gentleman."

"Hmmmm… yes I wonder" Nina says with a smile on her lips.

The peace of the bath is cut short as Vanessa barges in. Nina smiles as she sees her pass through the door "Well it is about time, I thought you would be right behind me itching to get the scoop."

"Scoop?" says the puzzled Vanessa. Waiving her off she pulls a foot stool and settles herself in for the story. With her elbows on her knees and her face cradled in her palms she smiles "Go on!"

Nina looks over at Olivia and chuckles as she begins to recounting the story for the Douches.

“And then you saw us walk up the stairs.”

Vanessa laughs and shakes her head “My goodness, I cannot believe he would do that, he must have thought ohh…” Vanessa catches herself and smiles, standing up she turns to take her leave.

“He must have what?” Nina asks straightening up in the bath her curiosity peaked.

Vanessa looks over at Olivia and then back to Nina.

“Well its best you speak to him about it.”

“Oh come now you aren’t being fair, I tell you everything and you won’t tell me this. I don’t wish to question him at all, please tell me.”

Turning to Olivia “You know too don’t you?”

Olivia smiles and says “No Miss I know not a thing, I am but a poor ladies maid.”

Stepping out of the bath an exasperated Nina turns to the women who dare withhold information from her “Well if that is how you wish to play so be it.”

“Look at you, why you are worse than Josephine, cease your sulking and I shall tell you” Vanessa concedes.

“Not long before you came to us, we had let go of a nanny. You remember her Olivia, Emily?”

“Oh yes your ladyship, what a wretch she was, thinking herself better than the Queen of England I wager. She and Kristine what a pairing that was, glad you got rid of her your Grace, she was an insufferable wretch.”

“The reason we let her go was because of the way she behaved, she felt it was beneath her to do her job. I was beside myself when I found the children roaming the meadow with her nowhere in sight. Whenever Steven would come for a visit she would just randomly disappear, leaving the children. The last time Steven came for a visit Decklyn told me he found them in the most compromising of positions in the forest. Granted Steven is charming and extremely handsome, but to belittle yourself and roll about with him like some kind of harlot when you are to be watching my children, oh no. As soon as she returned I confronted her and told her to pack her things and go. You would not believe that she had the audacity to tell me that I would regret my decision when she is married to the Earl, she

thought he would marry her, over the Dowagers cold dead body. Well I would have given him a piece of my mind as well but he was called away and had not returned till today. He must have thought you were Emily, you were with the children; you have similar coloring, though she is much shorter in stature than you. I am happy that you taught him a lesson, I shall inform him that henceforth he is not to seduce anymore of my staff, there are women for that in the brothels" concludes Vanessa.

Nina laughs "Oh Nessa you are too much!"

Thinking Nina continues "Though it would explain why Kristine has been so vicious towards me. She must have believed that I was taking Emily's place but when you welcomed me into your home as a friend not an employee she must have been livid. Taking her friends position as well as being welcomed wholeheartedly into your social circle."

"Kristine has been acting poorly towards you, why was I not informed!" exclaims in surprise the concerned Vanessa. "I will give her stern talking to; no one on my staff is to treat anyone from lowly scullery maid to the

Dowager herself, with anything other than complete and utter respect."

"No need Vanessa I have spoken to her myself and I have had no qualms with her since. Please do not trouble yourself."

"Very well but if there are any further incidences I insist that you inform me at once, I will not stand for such insubordination, in my home it will not be tolerated. Now that we have that settled I shall leave you to it, I have to ready myself for dinner" kissing Nina on the cheek she takes her leave.

"Which dress shall I wear tonight" Nina calls out to Olivia who is in the bedroom.

"Perhaps the blue one Miss, it is a bit chillier tonight."

"I thought the peach one, I have not had a chance to wear that one yet."

"That is more of a day dress Miss; its color is too light to be appreciated fully by candle light."

"Whatever you think is best" concedes Nina as she walks into the room to be dressed.

Watching herself in the mirror she sees the color appeal of the dress, particularly since she caught a bit of sun today and her skin is just slightly flushed. Her now rosy complections perfectly offsets the dress which is an icy power blue with a square neckline fringed with very fine Venetian lace; the sleeves are three quarter length, ending just below the elbow with the most exquisite Belgium binche lace as the cuff. Olivia curls her hair and pins the curls low so that they gingerly brush her neck as she walks. She takes the necklace that Nicki gave her and pins it in her hair like a headband, the delicate diamonds shining in her hair like fallen stars. Nina dabs her lips with some soft pink lipstick just to make them pop a bit as she takes a step back to take in the whole ensemble as Olivia declares "You look magnificent Miss, giving the Earl something to think about tonight."

"You do splendid work Olivia, I do not know what I would do without you."

Just as Nina is about to open the door Olivia retorts "You most likely wouldn't know, that shade of blue is the Earls favorite."

“What!!” exclaims Nina.

“It is too late now Miss, off to dinner you go.” She chuckles as she closes the door forcing Nina into the hallway.

Nina left with no choice steps away from the door and turns as she does she collides with none other than Steven. “I am so sorry I had not seen you there.”

“Please no need to apologize I should have made my presence known. My mother sent me to escort you to dinner.” He says as he offers her his arm.

“Yes of course” she smiles and takes it. The walk together in unison, as they come to the stairs Nina sees Vanessa paired with Declyn, the Dowager with the Doctor. Seeing the Nathaniel she inquires “I hope that the doctor has given you a clean bill of health.”

Looking down at her he smiles “Yes, nothing more than a scratch and thanks to your attentive nursing the wound was clean and well on its way to healing. Nathaniel said it might leave a scar, but most women find scars appealing and rugged do they not?” he says with a beguiling smile.

“Yes as long as you don’t tell them you obtained it whilst being whipped by a girl” chimes in Declyn as Vanessa swats his arm and whispers louder than intended “behave!”

Steven looks away from Nina embarrassed “I am sure it will be a handsome scar” retorts Nina with a smile upon her lips as they continue into the dining room. The Duke is seated at the head of the table with Vanessa to his right and the Dowager to his left. Steven takes his seat beside the Dowager whilst Nina takes the seat between Vanessa and the Doctor, Josephine sits by her uncle whilst Tristan sits next to the Doctor. The dinner to Nina’s delight is squarely focused on Steven who is regaling the dining party with stories from his travels, all the while stealing glances at Nina.

Steven finishes the tale of his adventures and the Dowager inquires of the Doctor “Nathaniel please tell me how is my son, is he well?”

“No need to worry yourself Viviane, it takes more than just a knock to the head to take down a young strapping buck like your son” boasts Nathaniel.

“The wound was expertly treated by Nicolette all I did was change the bandage, it will heal with minimal if any scaring.”

“Though we cannot say the same for his bruised ego” chimes the ever eager Duke.

“Oh Declyn really” the Dowager chastise him.

“Steven how on earth did you get hurt?” inquires the Dowager.

Steven looks across to Nina with the sweetest puppy dog look in his eyes which screams please help.

Nodding her head Nina begins “Well, it is entire my fault you see. I was off in the meadow with the children; we were having a one of our lessons when out of the corner of my eye I see a man stalking towards the children. Where I come from children are often kidnapped and assaulted by dreadfully disturbed people, and after what transpired earlier in the week with Christoff I was adamant not to have the same thing happen. I did not wish to alarm the children so I attempted to remove the assailant without them knowing anything is amiss. When I flung him to the

ground it frightened the children and I instructed them to run home. It wasn't until Steven bellowed for them that they were aware who the man was. When I realized that he was their Uncle I…"

"She treated me most kindly, cleaned my wound and apologized profusely. Though it is I who must apologize for frightening her and forcing her to act in such a protective manner. I must commend you on your instincts and ability to watch and protect my niece and nephew. Please accept my most humbles apology." He bows his head and looks at her through his thick dark unbelievably long lashes.

Nina is taken back as her breath hitches in her throat, she waives her hand "Please your grace, there is no need to apologize, as long as you are well that is all that matters."

"Miss Martin where did you learn such protective techniques?" inquires Declyn.

"I was taught self defense by an family of Asian immigrants. One day I saw one small boy fend off three larger children who were bullying him. I was fascinated and asked him where he learned this he was

shy and would not tell me. Several days later he and his father came to our door asking for work, I remembered the boy and I asked his father how the boy was taught when he told me it was a family tradition passed down through the generations I propped that I would employ him if he was willing to teach me the same."

'Thank god I graduated from George Costanza school of lying' *she thinks to herself.*

"And how is it then that you came to lose your clothing?" enquired the Dowager.

Embarrassed Nina looks at Steven upon whose lips plays a devious smile.

"That is another story entirely begins Nina" retelling the story. As she does sporadically she looks over at Steven who looks lost in his own memory of their encounter. Feeling his eyes on her a faint flush begins to creep up her cheeks as she feels him undress her with his eyes.

'You are imagining it Nina, he is not thinking of you just stop it.' *She tries to convince herself but the*

smoldering look in his eyes is says otherwise. Nina quickly brings the story to an end as she does the last course is brought out. She promptly eats a bit and excuses herself before anyone can ask any more questions.

"It has been an exhausting day, I think I shall retire early tonight."

"Of course my dear, understandably so. We shall see you in the morn, sleep well my dear" says the Dowager sympathetically.

As she exits the grand dining hall Nina makes her way towards the stairs, as she does a moonbeam filters through the window bathing her in its pallid light. She looks up and smiles lifting her skirts she switches direction and walks out the back of the house to roam the night.

The rest of the dining party takes their leave into the library to enjoy after dinner drinks and conversation. Decklyn and Steven keep to themselves by the side bar. "Some welcoming party you have assembled for me here tonight brother" chuckles Steven looking about at the sad turnout.

Taking a sip of his whiskey "So sorry dear bother that it is not up to your standards. Perhaps if you had given us more notice other than your girly cries from being manhandled by a mere wisp of a girl, perhaps, I could have arranged for something more to your liking." Steven jokingly punches at his brothers arm.

Declyn deftly escapes the blow wagging his finger he continues "Vanessa told me what transpired between you two and you cannot tell me you didn't enjoy it to some degree. The girl straddling you on the forest floor, then sauntering out of the lake like some water nymph, never have you been welcomed in such a way, of that I am certain."

A cheshire grin spreads across Stevens face as he recalls the scenes from his most memorable welcoming "No never..." his mind replaying the visions which have haunted him throughout dinner tonight.

Seeing his brother drift away with his thoughts Decklyn punctuates with a sly grin on his face "And if I remember correctly you had some preference to the forest floor on your last visit, did you not?"

The last comment snaps Steven out if his dream like state and he lunges at his brother, a short scuffle ensues. Without even missing a beat the Dowager snaps "Boys, that is enough!"

"Yes mother" the chime in unison whilst still playfully jabbing, poking and pulling at one another.

"Boys will be boys" Josephine states in an exasperated tone as she shakes her head at the sight.

Vanessa and the Dowager have a laugh at the audacity of the statement from the little trouble maker herself. The rest of the family joins in as Steven sneaks up behind his unsuspecting niece and plucks her out of her seat spinning her in the air until she screams with delight.

Nina walks about the grounds bathed in the light of the moon as she recounts the events of the day past.

'By God that was so uncomfortable, I know how they tried but the tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife. Steven kept staring at me and I just know he was replaying the scene where I walked out of the water in barely anything. Maybe I'm just

paranoid and totally self-conscious, but that is NOT a way you want to meet a new person. First I assaulted him then I flashed him, what a disaster.' *She shakes her head at the thought.*

Continuing her inner dialogue 'Ha… Nicki would never have let me live that down thank goodness it wasn't him. I could just hear his quips and ostentatious comments' she sighs 'I can't believe I miss the brute. Though it's interesting to see how different each of these men are. Yes obviously they aren't all the same, in my time or this but it's just fascinating to me how different and more innocent this time is. Obviously "they" aren't innocent but I'm sure that any woman in this time would rather have drowned then come out of the water so exposed. For me it wasn't so bad, I mean I've worn worse to the beach, I was more embarrassed for him, for putting him in that uncomfortable situation, though I'm sure he really didn't mind. So what is bothering me then? Maybe it's the fact that for him it wasn't so simple or that he is going to be thinking of me in, you know "that way". The looks during dinner were making me … oh let's face it Nina they were making you HOT!! Don't try to deny it, it

was exciting to come out of the water like that, you swayed and sashayed try to pull an Ursula Andress. It was exhilarating, titillating even, it felt good being the "bad girl" corrupting the innocence of a time lost.' She giggles to herself.

As she does she hears "Who's there? Emily is that you" whispers a male someone.

She spies through the brush a clearing surrounded by high bushes illuminated by the full moon, in its center a stoic figure, pacing back and forth murmuring to himself.

"Brilliant Steven, brilliant gawking at her like an oaf, like you have never seen a woman before, really… what must she think of you. She took it in stride did she not? Well she was probably trying to salvage some decorum, where as you…UGHHH" he smacks himself in the forehead with his open palm.

Nina watches Steven mumble to himself, hearing a word here and there, most of it he is mumbling in hushed tones only punctuating his exasperations. Feelings of guilt for watching such a private moment overwhelm her and she decides to make her presence

known. Pushing through the shrubbery she makes her way into the clearing.

Steven turns, a smile graces his face as he sees a figure emerges from the bushes. He strides over to help her through holding the branches, as he does her foot gets caught on one of the lower laying branches and she tips forward. Steven catches her; she wraps her arms about him leaning on him for support as he holds her flush to his body.

"How is it that you always manage to find yourself in my arms my dove?" Steven says in a smirking tone.

"Oops, my apologies" says Nina as she looks up to find Steven with his eyes smoldering one second and filled with surprise and mortification the next.

He lets go of her and she stumbles from being let go so suddenly.

Embarrassed she pretends to smooth's down her skirts, finally gathering her composure she looks up at him.

"My apologies my Lord, I was just wondering the grounds and I heard a noise, I came to see what it was,

I did not mean to interrupt you, I will take my leave, goodnight."

He grabs for her wrist "No, no need to go I was just walking the grounds myself." He releases her wrist when he sees her stare at his hand upon hers.

"It is I who should be begging for your forgiveness Miss Martin. My actions earlier today were deplorable and inappropriate and I ask that you forgive me" he bows, reaching for her hand to lay a kiss upon it.

"You had taken me by surprise my Lord, I … earlier in the week I had a rather unpleasant encounter with a gentleman and you can say I was on the defensive. So when you … held me, the way you did… I felt the need to protect myself and the children. Looking back it is apparent that you must have mistaken me for someone you were, um… rather familiar with. Emily is it?"

He nods in understanding until he hears her speak the name.

“I heard you call out for an Emily prior to my joining you here. Emily was children’s nanny? It was she who you assumed I was, was it not sir?”

Seeing him stand there speechless and absolutely mortified she stutters “I..fff that is who you assumed me to be I am relieved, I am glad you are not some deviant running about the woods grabbing at unsuspecting women” she says with a smile playing upon her lips.

He finds himself smiling with her.

Bowing his head he concedes “Yes it was, I thought you were Emily, I am most humiliated at my actions, it is just that… you … I…I should have confirmed before I decided to surprise my intended.”

“Please let us put this episode behind us, we shall not speak of it anymore.” She says with a smile. Turning to leave she bids him a good night, as she proceeds to exit through the gate at the other end of the clearing.

Not wishing to part with her, this enchantingly peculiar woman he quickly catches up and falls in step with her.

“The least you can do is allow me to escort you back, you never know what kind of deviants are prowling these woods.” He says with a glint in his eye.

“What of your secret rendezvous?”

“There was no rendezvous Miss, I was just walking to clear my head.”

“Of course you were” she smiles up at him knowingly.

They proceed to walk back to the manor, as they near the steps Steven stops looking rather uncomfortable.

It takes a moment for Nina to realize that he is no longer beside her, she stops and turns. She sees how unsettled his expression is and she is about to step down to walk back when in one svelte swoop she finds him before her. Uncomfortable with the close proximity of their bodies she takes a step back as does he, they look back at one another and laugh.

‘He has such an enchanting smile.’ She thinks to herself.

“I wish to ask a favor of you Miss Martin. It would be much appreciated if you did not speak of my

involvement with Miss Emily to the rest of the family. And I must express my gratitude for not telling them the details of our encounter" he blushes as he continues on "I … had mistaken you for her regardless, I should not have done what I had, and I am most relieved that you are willing to forgive me and put the matter behind us."

"I know of nothing, and I am more than happy to do so, goodnight Sir." She turns to leave but before she can she feels him take her hand once more.

Turning back around she sees him standing a step below her, he bow's over her hand and once more kisses her hand.

"Good night, Miss Martin."

"Goodnight" she replies quickly as she pulls her hand out of his and hurries up the steps and into the manor.

Chapter 8

At Water's Edge - Chapter 11

This chapter is dedicated to FeyDoc who helped me out with some great writing tips and was kind enough to offer to help me with the editing.

Here is Ch 11 FINALY!!!! I am sorry to have made you guys wait, I just needed to take my time. I had a bit of writers block, I couldn't for the life of me figure out how to bring in Nicki and the diary part was making me crazy. I hope I did a good job, I promise more of him in the next chapter. Writing that diary entry was difficult, I didn't want to say too much but I didn't want to say too little, I really had to delve into Nina's head and heart to do it right, I hope I did her justice.

Ch 12 is going to be hard I am still totally in love with Nicki and I'm scared I won't do Steven justice. Any of you fellow writers who's main character falls for more than one person in your book have pointers? Not only does Nina have to fall in love multiple times so do I, and that's hard. What's worse is I know what happens going fwd so I'm jaded and don't want to give myself up to heartbreak. Do I sound crazy or does this make any sense to anyone!!

Thank you all for reading, you have no idea how happy I was to see all your comments votes and reads. What a wonderful way to wake up on a miserable Monday.

Kisses,

JoJo

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'Don’t even think about it Nina, no, no, no, NO!! You managed to dissuade one only to have an even more dangerous one take his place' frustrated she pushes herself off the door and begins to undress. Too tired to care she leaves the dress in a heap on the floor as she crawls exhausted into bed. Reaching for her journal she flips to an empty page.

Dear D,

What a day, I promise to write more tomorrow but all I can say for now is OH...OH... yep oh boy, literally.

Night,

XoXoXo Nina

Waking up Nina is far more exhausted than she was when she went to bed not to mention she is unbarably sore.

"Oh my God I hurt!" She croaks as Olivia pulls back the curtains.

"Olivia I..." Nina attempts to get out of bed "ahhhhh....oh that hurts" screams Nina.

"I must have slept in the same position all night, my muscles are so cramped” whimpering she continues “I didn’t even know you can hurt in so many different places all at once.

“Olivia laughs at Nina as she hobbles about the room.

Let me help you miss" Olivia says grabbing the end of the dressing gown Nina is trying to put on and is failing miserably.

"I need a massage" whines Nina.

"Come here let me see what I can do" smiles the maid.

Obediently Nina limps across the room and lays herself back on the bed letting Olivia kneed her sore muscles.

After the short session Nina feels well enough to get dressed and join the family for breakfast.

"Miss it is a warm day today the family *is breaking fast on the terrace" Olivia informs her.*

"Thank you" replies Nina as she shuts the door behind her.

Making her way down she can hear the family boisterously, enjoying the morn.

"Look Uncle there's Nina, I told you she would join us before long" chirps Josephine happily.

Nina smiles and greets the rowdy group.

She walks over to the only empty seat which just happens to be right next to Steven, Josephine just freed up the chair by parking herself in her uncle's lap.

As she reaches for the chair Steven stands and pulls it out for her.

"Thank you" she replies as he glides her chair beneath her.

She feels rather anxious for some odd reason and tries to ignore his presence but it is impossible.

"Miss Martin" starts Steven "Josephine *informed me that you have lessons daily, would you mind terribly if I joined you today?" he ask innocently.*

Nina gulps practically choking on her fruit as she looks over to Vanessa for assistance in answering him.

"It would be my *pleasure to have you join us but, it is difficult enough to keep the children focused with the stunning weather we are having, it would be that much more difficult to keep them interested in the lessons if you were there to distract them. Perhaps we should wait a bit until the novelty of having you here has worn off before you join us."*

For a split second Nina sees disappointment dance beyond his eyes but just as she realizes it, it is swiped away with a blink of his luxurious lashes.

Feeling bad Nina suggest "You may walk with us if you wish, but you must leave us until the lesson is over."

Brightening he agrees.

"My dear how are you fairing today" inquires the Dowager.

"Better a bit sore but feeling very well, kind of you to ask."

As the breakfast comes to an end Nina collects the children along with the Earl and they begin the walk to the lake. Upon reaching the meadow the children spur the Earl into a competitive run, Nina declines the offer barely able to walk never mind run. Seeing her walking alone Tristan forfeits the race to keep her company.

Seeing him walk back towards her causes Nina to smile "Aren't you sweet and chivalrous to boot" taking his offered arm she continues "You really did not have to, I know how you both miss your Uncle I am quite content to walk and be spectator to your musings."

Tristan shyly looks away towards the deft Josephine escaping her uncle's grasp.

"Is the reason that Uncle cannot join us because of what happened yesterday?"he inquires blushing.

"Fret not we have discussed the matter and put it behind us" Nina hugs Tristan to her side, and is rewarded by a shy smile "the real reason my dear is I cannot speak freely about the wonders of my time if he is in our company. We cannot tell everyone, the more people know the harder it will be to keep the secret. If

the time comes, when we need to share my secret we will, but until then we shall keep it hush-hush" Nina winks and smiles fondly at the sweet boy.

The race comes to an end and the winner Josephine is prancing about the field victoriously, until Steven scoops her up and perches her on his shoulders as he begins the run back. For a split second Nina notes an unusual expression on his face, but it fades as quickly as it appeared when he falls in step with Nina and Tristan.

"I beat Uncle!!" Josephine exclaims her hands waiving in the air. She leans down to give Nina a celebratory hug, forcing Steven to stop allowing her to wrap her hands around Nina's neck. As she does Steven pivots to the left allowing her to better reach Nina, but this also brings the two together awkwardly. Steven leans his head to the right whilst Nina moves hers to the left unwittingly neither realizing until their faces are mere hairs apart. Shock and surprise mar both their faces until Steven smiles at her whispering "she is a minx isn't she."

“Most definitely” retorts Nina as she mirrors Stevens amused expression.

“All right that is enough love.” Says Nina as she taps Josephine’s leg.

“Uh...uh” Josephine shakes her head.

Steven pulls in one direction and Nina in the other only to be slapped together their faces even closer than before.

Nina furrows her brow in exasperation “Josephine let go this instant or there will be no lessons today for you and you will be sequestered to your room for the rest of the day with no desert.”

Squeezing them even tighter together Steven looks at Nina apologetically but none the less with a gleam in his eye. Their faces are so close together that their breaths are intermingling.

‘We are so close If I just turn my head our lips would brush’ *Nina thinks to herself making blush creep slowly up her cheeks.*

As she begins to reprimand herself for the foolish thought Josephine lets her go leaving Nina in Stevens embrace, but neither is aware as their gazes are locked oblivious to their surroundings.

"Ahem" Tristan clears his throat jolting the adults back to reality.

"Oh…goodness" Nina smiles uncomfortably as she steps out of Stevens hold. She turns sharply and walks on alone, leaving the rest of the party to hurry on after her.

Upon reaching the lake Nina turns to Steven who is taking Josephine off his shoulders.

"Well its best we begin children, thank you your grace we shall rejoin you at the manor for high noon tea."

Confused Steven notes the change in her demeanor, confused he inquires "May I return and escort you back?" he says with a smile which quickly creeps across his lips. Looking down sheepishly he continues "As you know these woods are littered with devious men, it is best you are always escorted" he ends looking up at her through his thick fanned lashes as

the smile spreads from his slow drawn lips to his warm laughing eyes.

Nina is momentarily rendered speechless, 'he did not just pull that smoldering "no I'm not trying to seduce you I am always this ...this... delectable!" Ughhhh... he is killing me with that look' Nina internalizes. Angry that she has allowed him to get to her she collects herself and responds coolly "You may do as you wish my Lord".

Taken back by her lack of humor at his witticism, more over at one he had deliberately chosen to remind her of that rather intimate night, in hopes of brightening her disposition. Confused he bows to her and without a word begins his walk back.

As she watches him walk away she chastises herself for being so rude 'He didn't deserve that, did he... UGHHHH... why did you do that Nina, you are supposed to be making a good impression after what happened not making things worse.'

Lost in her thoughts she is brought back by Josephine's tug on her arm "Nina, will Uncle be returning? Why did you send him away?" she pouts.

Lowering herself to the child's level she takes her little hands in hers "Because my dear you would not pay attention to my lessons as your Uncle is a great distraction to you both. He will return I'm sure…"

'I hope' *she thinks as she looks past the children to his retreating figure.*

"How about a compromise, I will try to devise a lesson in which your Uncle can participate, but I will only do so if you both are really good for the next week. That means no bickering or arguing, I wish for you both to behave like perfect little angels that I know you both are …deep down inside" she ends with a jovial smile upon her face.

"Yay!!! We will be Nina, we will, aren't we Tristan?" says Josephine jumping up and down looking at her brother.

"We will try" smiles Tristan.

Getting up Nina claps her hands "Excellent, now what should we study? I know, how about a pet project? This lake has frogs and if it has frogs it has tadpoles, it

will be the perfect lesson on metamorphosis. Let us see if there are any in there now."

Nina walks with the children to the edge of the lake to look for the tadpoles, I see something in the water but I am not sure that it is them, perhaps in few weeks' time they will be large enough to catch."

"What is meformissums?" asks Josephine scrunching her face as she tries to pronounce the word.

Nina laughs at her attempt "Metamorphosis is a biological process during which an animal develops physically after being born. Which means that they begin their life as one thing and once they grow up they look completely different. Like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly, it happens in stages and I would like for you to see it unfold."

"Oh goody!" exclaims Josephine excited "Does that mean that I will have a new pet?"

"Well first we need to see how responsible you are. We will do an experiment I will give each one of you an egg which will be your baby, you must take care of it, you cannot allow it to crack. If in the time the

tadpoles are grown large enough for us to catch your eggs are still whole you will each have your own tadpole. How does that sound?"

As Steven nears the lake sounds of laughter become louder and louder. Curious he hurries along to see what has the children so amused, as he climbs up the hill the sight before him is one he did not expect. The three are running amuck on the shores of the lake, growling and pawing at one another, flapping their arms and hopping. His approach goes unnoticed as they are far too occupied with their current game.

"Birds" yells out Tristan.

Nina exclaims "eagle" and she swoops down to grab a hold of Josephine who is still hopping about like a bunny.

"I'm going to eat you" Nina squawks as she picks up Josephine spinning her in the air both of them are laughing in unison. Steven walks up to them surprising them with a growl like that of a bear, as he does the lot of them scream in fright running away or flying in some cases. Nina looks at him grinning and laughing in such a care free manner he is taken back

at how different she is at this moment compared to earlier. Her hair has freed itself from its pins and ribbons flowing freely behind her as she runs away from him.

"Wolf" she yells' out spurring Tristan to get on all fours and chase after Josephine who is still hippity hopping. He reaches her and tackles her from behind, but his victory is short lived as Nina joins Josephine and joins in tickling Tristan. Steven finally catches up to them Nina looks up at him captivating him with yet another one of her uninhibited smiles. A grin begins to spread on his face but it is wiped as quickly as it appeared when Tristan jumps on his back bringing him down to the ground. Together with Josephine and Nina, Tristan pins his uncle down whilst tickling him until he concedes defeat.

Still laughing her heart out, Nina pulls out of the entanglement to watch the three of them taking turns ganging up on one another. Soon enough they have completely exerted themselves and collapsed on the ground panting with beaming smiles adorning all three faces.

Nina looks over them fondly her eyes finally resting on Steven a strange feeling overcomes her quickly she realizes that watching him play with the children awakened some primal yearning. Confused and even more flustered she tries to suppress the emotion, glimpsing back at Steven she sees he has raised himself on his elbows and is looking straight at her. A silent moment passes between the two, neither able to let go of the others gaze. Nina manages to look away finally breaking the spell looking down at her lap she smiles coyly "Thank you for returning to fetching us for tea time."

Breathless Steven nods "You are most welcome, is this how all of your lessons end?" he smirks.

"Some, not all" she grins back.

Steven gets up walks towards her, offers her his hand to help her up.

"Thank you" she whispers timidly looking up at him through her lashes.

In turn he flashes her one of his alluring smiles "It was my pleasure."

Turning their attention back to the children Steven says "Up you go you ragamuffins; your mother will be mortified at what you have done to your clothes."

The Dowager steps out on to the veranda "Vanessa have you seen Steven he is nowhere to be found."

Declyn who is seated next to Vanessa with his back to his mother rolls his eyes.

Vanessa smiles at her husband's annoyance "He has walked over to the lake to fetch Nina and the children, they should be returning shortly."

"Ahh yes very good, well I hope he isn't over exerting himself he must be careful after the accident" she says as she seats herself next to Declyn.

Looking out over the gardens she spies the four of them returning. "There they are!" she exclaims getting out of her seat enthusiastically waiving to them, and they waive to her in return.

"Oh just look at that handsome sight" she gushes at the approaching quartet.

Vanessa looks on with Viviane whilst Declyn excuses himself to have a smoke.

"Will I ever be fortunate enough to see him married of and happy" pines the Dowager sighing she continues "I declare he will be the death of me, he simply refuses to take the matter seriously."

"Perhaps Viviane he has not found the right woman, once he does I am certain he will not hesitate. Just look at Decklyn" she smiles looking over at her husband fondly.

"From your ears to Gods ears, my dear." muses Viviane "They do look well suited for one another do they not" she comments with her face alight with new possibility.

"Viviane" warns Vanessa "it is best you leave it up to them, you know what happens when one meddles."

"Oh poppycock, you and Declyn would have never realized how foolish you were acting if your cousin and I had not concocted that devious plan" she says matter-a-factly.

Getting heated Vanessa replies "Yes and if you recall the sole reason for all our squabbling was due to your incessant scheming."

Dismissing the the idea she waives off Vanessa's retort "It worked regardless."

As they approach the mansion Nina notices Viviane looking fondly at them, she is smiling in a way that Nina has never seen before but suspiciously it looks rather familiar. Whilst speaking to Vanessa the Dowager is gesturing at Nina, as she gets closer to the terrace Nina is able to read their lips. Realizing what their exchange is in regards to she looks over her group and sees that she is walking in rather intimate proximity to Steven, the lot of them are laughing giving an impression of a very happy little family, like something out of a tv add. Her prior thoughts flood her mind making her feel uncomfortable, not wanting to justify their assumptions Nina starts to pull away from Steven. Walking sideways to her right she attempts to put some distance between them, unwittingly Steven follows suit bridging the gap between them. Exasperated Nina withdrawals from his

presence again only have Steven mirror her movements once more. Determined she drags poor Josephine with her creating a larger gap between them, as she does she hears a familiar chuckle, looking up she sees Declyn in stitches watching what must look like a lot of drunken crabs running amuck on the lawn. Embarrassed she gives up and hurriedly makes her way to the stairs, as she reaches them Steven offers her his arm she disregards the gesture instead with her free hand she grabs her skirts and makes her way up. Reaching the top she lets go of Josephine nods at the Dowager, glares at Vanessa and rolls her eyes at Declyn who is still laughing in amusement. Taking shelter in the house Nina hears Vanessa chide the children for the mess they made of themselves whilst the Dowager is of course fussing over Steven.

"Nina…" Steven calls out to her as he tries to escape his mother's incessant nagging.

Nina makes her way up the stairs ignoring his call, guilt quickly overtakes her, half way up she stops looks over the banister at his confused face. Putting on a smile she says "I'm sorry Steven I am fatigued, I will be

in my room resting until dinner, please tell the others" she smiles weakly once more at him and continues her way up.

"Yes, of course" he answers brandishing her one of his most alluring smiles but she has already turned and continued on her way never waiting for his response. Confused he returns to the others on his way out he meets Vanessa pulling her unruly brood, stopping her he inquires "What was all that about?"

"I… I… ugh ask your meddling mother" Vanessa says in an exasperated tone as she ushers the children up the stairs "up, up off to the baths with you before any tea is served!"

Shutting the door Nina flops on the bed pulling her diary off the nightstand and begins to write.

Dear D,

As promised… let me start at the beginning, so I finally got the meet the infamous Steven Wakefield and after all I have heard I expected nothing short of perfection. Not that the boy disappoints not in the very least, he is GORGEOUS, I swear I don't know what they put in the

water here but they just get keep getting better and better. He is tall but not as tall as Nicki a few inches shorter I'd say; athletically built with broad shoulders that taper into a very fit waist, totally has that triangle thing going on, hmmmm…yep. His face is finely sculpted with European high cheek bones, a strong nose and a square jaw that makes you melt at the knees. He has raven black hair which makes his ridiculously blue eyes even bluer, they are like the Caribbean and the arctic melded into perfection.

When he wrapped his arms around me I totally freaked out, I really thought it was Christoff, in the back of my mind I think that I knew he wasn't he didn't smell like him or feel like him, but in that moment I didn't care. I flung him over my shoulder as a punishment for the sheer audacity he had putting his hands on me. I knew it must have been some kind of mix-up but I didn't appreciate it in the least. I was ready to work out my frustrations on him, he was soooo…. lucky the kids stopped me. When I realized who he was I was taken back, he looked at me in shock but playfully none the less, thinking back that look makes me think he finds himself in such situation

often. He is nothing like I expected him to be, Declyn is a joker but totally straight laced, while Steven is altogether different. To compare him to Nicki (coz let's face it all men going fwd will be) Nicki is a cocky SOB and rightfully so but Steven he's more playful I think, don't get me wrong he knows he is HOT but he plays coy, almost strategically. He brandishes his wicked smiles at the most opportune times for him, in complete disregard for the poor female recipients who literally has her breath knocked out of her at a mere glance.

Confession time!!

I have no idea what gets in my head when he's around me, I'm so aware of him, and sometimes feel uneasy. It's like he pulls me in and I find myself gravitating to him it's a really odd feeling. I don't like not being in control, not that I'm some control freak, I just... its strange. Maybe it's all due to the way we met, it was a very amped up, tension filled moment and perhaps these are the remnants making our every meeting very anxious. With Nicki I played without worry, I think sometimes I forget Steven isn't

Nicki and I go along with my usual antics, not realizing.

What's worse and possibly making the whole situation even more uncomfortable is that several times while we played with the children I would step back and look at the scene and would think I want this. I want a family of my own, I want this happiness, this joy I want a husband, a son who looks just like him and a lively precocious girl to mirror me. This thought process is even more unsettling as its never happened to me before, I wholly blame Vanessa and her foolish notions filling my head with these crazy ideas. My hope is that this foolishness will just pass and I'll look back at all this one day soon and laugh.

When we were walking back from the lake I knew exactly what the Dowager was thinking, she was scheming how to get us two together. I recognized that glint in her eye, it's the very same one Vanessa and Josephine get when they're trying to trap me in some awkward situation with a poor unsuspecting guy. This time I was not having any of it, I tried to distance myself from him but he just followed me, I don't think

he was being facetious, heck I don't think he even knew he was doing it, he was just following the leader and keeping close. We must have looked ridiculous walking sideways on the lawn, no wonder Decklyn was laughing like he was.

Oh well nothing new for me, I try to do the right thing and make a complete fool of myself. Ok D that's it I don't know what else to tell you, it's just a waiting game here, though all these distractions are making my time go by rather quickly and I'm sad because when I leave I'm really going to miss all of this, all of them.

Kisses,

Nina

A knock on the door disrupts Nina's little writing haven "You may enter" she answers. The door opens and none other than Kristine enters and curtsies, "Madam, the Duchess requested that you be informed that dinner will be served earlier than usual."

"Thank you Kristine" she closes the notebook places it on her nightstand "please send Olivia up I do not wish

to be tardy" she continues. Looking back to at the scullery maid she smiles "Very nice to see you again."

"Thank you Madam" she smiles meekly and departs.

"Well that was interesting" Nina says to herself.

The next hour or so Nina is poked, pulled and prodded finally when she gets to look at Olivia's masterful work she is in awe. "Seriously, you have out done yourself Livy" Nina smiles at the mirror. The woman staring back at her is not the same that walked into this room all those months ago. Her figure has slimmed substantially thanks to all the running after the children, her hair has grown out and without all the straighteners and blow-drying has begun to curl in soft sultry waives. The dress Olivia pulled is of raw silk in an interesting mix of olive and forest green which makes Nina's eyes stand out especially with the peaches and cream complexion all the fresh air and sun has given her. Smiling at her reflection she notes the inventive way the maid has put Nicki's necklace to use weaving it through her hair almost forming a spider web of jewels which is remarkably enough holding her hair up in a Grecian style.

“Wherever did you come up with this Livy?” asks a rather impressed Nina.

“I was inspired to do something different, I have no idea how or what, it just is. Now off you go” she shoos he towards to the door just as a soft knock interrupts them.

Nina opens the door to find Steven standing on the other side looking dapper and dashing holding a white rose in full bloom. She looks from the rose to his eyes and smiles as he extends it to her.

“For me” she smiles, as she accepts it.

Looking back at him she beams “Thank you, it is very sweet of you, I know just what to do with it” she says as she walks past him to the mirror. She snaps the stem in half and places the fragrant bloom above her right ear securing it with a few extra pins.

“Beautiful” she whispers, admiring the bloom “Mmmm… yes” Seven responds as he openly admires her reflection.

Nina blushes as she gazes at him in the mirror by the look he was giving her he most certainly was not referring to the rose.

Taking his extended hand they descend the stairs to join the others.

Dinner moves quickly, as does the conversation which has everyone engaged. The children tell every one of their pending experiment and their lesson with Uncle Steven.

"Nina" begins Vanessa "did you see you received an invitation today".

"Have I?" She says surprised.

Vanessa nods "We all have, the next ball is being thrown by Queen Charlotte; it will be the most lavish spectacle you will ever see. Every year she manages to outdo herself, I cannot wait what she has in store for us."

"Viviane, do you know?" asks Vanessa.

"I do and I will say you shall not be disappointed my dear, it will be remarkable. Charlotte informed me

that Fernando the VII the crowned King of Spain will be in attendance."

"Really?" Vanessa says surprised "I thought we were not on the best of terms with the House of Bourbon."

"Well pretenses must be kept for the sake of peace. It is rumored that he is looking for a second wife, he is in desperate need of an heir, and perhaps he is venturing outside of Spain for his next bride."

Nina leans over to Vanessa whispering "The Dowager is on a first name basis with the Queen?"

"Yes, the late Duke was fifth in line to the royal throne, being the first cousin of King George. Viviane and the Queen are great friends, when the Queen first came from Germany Viviane was one of a very few English courtesans to grace her court. That was how she met the Duke; Declyn spent much of childhood playing in the courts with the royal brood" whispers Vanessa proudly.

"You mean to tell me that Declyn is in line for the throne?" murmurs Nina in total awe.

“Yes I believe he is thirteenth in line, the King and Queen have had quite a few children, safe to say I highly doubt that our family will have its turn on the throne.”

“None the less that is amazing” retorts Nina in hushed tones looking at Declyn in a whole new light.

The staff comes to collect their plates and the women move to the library whilst the men retreat to the study.

“It is a beautiful night shall we take advantage of the mild weather and take in some fresh night air?” suggests Nina.

“A splendid idea Nina” chimes the Dowager calling for the servants to ready the terrace.

Declyn and Steven return to the library just as the servants open the doors. As Nina is about to step out Steven appears by her side offering her his arm whilst brandishing his most appealing smile. She graciously accepts and they cross over the threshold together.

Instead for following everyone else Steven takes Nina towards the stairs “I was hoping to take a stroll about

the grounds, would you be so kind as to keep me company?"

"Ummm…" Nina looks nervously past Steven to catch Vanessa's eye, who nods in acknowledgement to go and joining him.

Smiling timidly Nina nods in agreement.

"Yes" grins Steven "Yes" answers Nina unable to contain her smirk at his surprise.

She walks beside him as they walk down the stairs and begin their stroll.

"It is a beautiful night" says Nina trying to break the silence.

"Yes it most certainly, the weather has been rather mild" Steven retorts.

'What are we doing talking about the weather, how pathetic Nina, ugh…. Why did you say yes?' Nina chastises herself.

A noise from the balcony captures Nina's attention, turning she wonders what the commotion is about.

Trying to recapture Nina's attention Steven places his hand on the small of her back guiding her on "Are you eager to be attending the ball?"

"Most certainly, I never expected to receive an invitation."

"I hope I am not too presumptuous nevertheless I would be most honored…"

"EEEEEEEEEKKKKKKKKKKKK…" screams Nina as she is swept from the ground.

Nina grabs for Steven but before she can she is spun about "Come now mon chere scream louder for me."

Nina intakes her breath and screeches out "Nicki!!! Put me down this instant" just as the rogue wraps his arms around her tight shifting her until he is holding her bridal style.

Nina wraps her arms around his neck "You came back".

"It thus appears I have come just in time to save you from breaking another heart."

“You are a wicked, wicked man, now put me down” she reprimands him unable to contain her smile.

Putting her back on the ground he turns to Steven “Wakefield” nods Nicki “Monsieur Devereux” replies Steven extending his hand to the newcomer.

Shaking it Nicki smiles devilishly “To spare the lovely miss I shall answer for her, yes you were rather presumptuous in believing she was without escort.”

Shocked and a bit embarrassed Nina exclaims “Oh… Steven I am sorry Nicki has most graciously accepted the position of being my escort for the season.”

“No need for apologies Miss Nicolette, perhaps you would be so kind then to allow me a place on your dance card.”

“Oh most certainly!” she exclaims.

“Come mon coeur let us return” says Nicki eying Steven whilst directing Nina back to the balcony.

“You fount them” exclaims Vanessa as she sees Nicki return with Nina and a rather irate Steven in tow.

Moving towards the bar Steven joins his brother “Now I understand your distain for the man” says Steven gruffly as he takes the drink Declyn is offering him.

Chapter 9

At Water's Edge - Chapter 12 Part I

Hi guys, well here is a very short chapter, I am sorry it's not longer but rI eally wanted to give you at least something as a thank you for your patience, love and encouragement. I promise to post again soon (maybe in a week, if work slows down) as this is in no way what I wanted to give you for Ch 12, so tYES here will be a Part I and a Part II. Please keep in mind this is completely unedited and to my sleep deprived mind looks and sounds great. I'm sure in the morning I will regret posting this LOL.

Kisses and sweet dreams Love always Your JoJo.

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Chapter 12.

Choosing to stay away from the group that has now gathered around the Count, Steven intently observes how both Vanessa and Nicolette hang on to his every word. Irking him more is how easy and relaxed Nicolette is around Nicholas, smiling in the carefree way she was whilst running free with the children. An ache begins to build in his gut and with ever touch of the Counts hand, every smile she smiles just for him the dull pain grows until it finally etches his face.

Declyn observes his little brothers reaction to Nicki, chuckling to himself he continues their earlier conversation.

Snapping out of the fog which has descended upon his thoughts "Ummm…. Pardon?" Steven asks confused.

Declyn smiles deviously "I said, you won't truly understand little brother until he is fawning over the woman you love, till then he is just a mild annoyance, or rather an inconvenience to your prowling."

Pausing for a moment he continues "Unless.... there was more to that walk than what meets the eye" he raises his eyebrow in question.

"Don't be ridiculous I was just being cordial. I would be more than happy to be her escort if she knew no one, I could have had an excuse not to have to spend the night entertaining the marriage vultures and their irksome mothers."

Reluctantly drawing his gaze from Nicolette he continues " Mother has informed me that Nicolette will be with us only for the season, which is of course perfect for perhaps a bit of fun, for both of us" replies Steven eyebrows wiggling.

"That's my little brother carrying on the family tradition" he harps slapping Steven on the back.

Nicki saunters over to the brothers "Wakefield" he nods to the Duke.

"Devereux, I thought we wouldn't be graced with your presence just yet."

“I dare not leave my Nicolette on her own with all the young bucks just waiting to occupy her attentions and whisk her away from me.”

Steven visibly flinching at the words ‘my Nicolette’ causes Nicki to smile.

Not able to stand to be in his presence any longer Steven excuses himself and bids goodnight to all, and lastly stops before Nina. He takes her hand cupping it between his, he bows and places a gentle kisses upon both her hands, whilst gazing at her through his dark lashes.

“Goodnight, my dear” he raises himself to his full height his eyes never leaving hers, he reaches up and caresses the flower still vibrant in her hair.

Surprised Nina’s breath hitches in her throat, she answers rather flustered “Goodnight your Lordship”.

Turning his attentions back to her face he focuses on her mouth and smiles “Please call me Steven, we are friends there is no need for such formalities.”

“Sss…Steven” she stammers as a small smile creeps upon her lips. Just then Nicki walks over, standing

behind her with his hand on the small of her back glaring at Steven.

Looking him squarely in the eye Steven grins mischievously nodding his head 'Two can play that game' he thinks to himself as he turns on his heels and disappears through the darkened doorway.

"Where are you off to" asks Vanessa catching Nina just as she is rushing out the door to a ready coach.

"I am having a meeting at the shop in regards to the design of the dresses" she says tapping her sketch pad "I will be stopping at Fiona's first and together we will go to Evangeline's."

"And how is my dress coming along, may I see?"

"Very well and no you may not I wish for it to be a surprise, thought if you have a preference to a color or material please do tell me, it will make it easier."

"I shall think about it and let you know."

And I will look through the inventory and give you a choice of the best" smiles Nina just as she slips through the door and into her carriage.

Pulling up to the Dartmouth estate she sees Fiona eagerly waiting her arrival.

Nina steps out of the carriage to an anxious Fiona.

"Hello dearest" Nina whispers as she embraces her friend.

Fiona squeezes her back but when she pulls away Nina can see her young friend's brow is furred in worry.

"What is amiss, sweetheart?" questions Nina as she holds Fiona at arm's length.

Fiona looks her in the eye and breaks down "I have no escort!"

"What do you mean you have no escort, what of all those young men that you danced with at your gala?"

Hiccupping Fiona answers "The Queens ball is an annual event and apparently all of them secured their partners ahead of time. I said I am prepared to go alone but Auntie has come up with the brilliant solution of having Jacob be my escort. I will be the laughing stock if I walk into the biggest event of the season with my little brother as my escort."

“Oh no that simply will not do, there must be someone else we can ask. Calm yourself my dear we will find a solution” wrapping her arm protectively around Fiona they walk into the house.

Stepping in they see Contessa Parish waiting for them before the doors to the parlor.

“Your ladyship” Nina curtsies before the stern woman.

“Welcome my dear” says the Contessa ushering them both in, Nina seats herself across the way from the Countess whilst Fiona seats herself next to her aunt.

“Fiona do cease your pouting it is simply unladylike, it is no wonder we were unable procure you a chaperone.”

Seeing this as her way into the discussion Nina interjects “Your ladyship I would be most honored if you would allow me to assist you in this predicament, I am certain I could find someone that will be more than delighted to escort Fiona.”

“No need child I have taken care of the matter already” she says with an air of finality.

“You have? Well that is wonderful, who is the most fortunate gentleman?” in quires Nina.

“ Jacob.”

“J…Jacob…w”

“Yes and as the matter is settled we will not speak of it any longer.” As the words leave her lips Fiona whimpers as another bout of sobs escapes her.

“With all due respect Contessa, Fiona cannot be escorted by her own brother it is unseemly and she will be scorned by the ton. It would be best if she have no escort at all than to be seen with her brother moreover, one her junior.”

Shocked by her forwardness the Contessa is quiet for a moment and Nina continues.

“If you give me until the end of the week I am sure I can find her a suitable escort.”

“You are most kind Miss Martin, but there is simply no need to tire yourself, the matter is as I have stated previously not open for discussion.”

At that Fiona begins to weep profusely begging her aunt to allow Nina to try.

Her face softening at the anguish of her young niece Contessa Parish concedes "Very well but you have until noon tomorrow to find someone suitable, I expect you to bring the fortunate man here for tea. If you cannot find anyone, or I do not deem the gentleman to be fitting we will revert to my original suggestion" she ends patting Fiona on the hand.

Fiona throws her arms around her aunt "Thank you, oh thank you auntie" kissing her on the cheek.

"Well, that was unexpected" Contessa Parish smiles but quickly her composure changes and she is as composed as ever whilst pouring the tea.

Tea time comes to an end Fiona and Nina take their leave to continue on to Evangeline's.

"Thank you Nina I know not how I would have been able to convince her otherwise."

Nina laughs "I do believe it was your tears that convinced her more than my words, she is good and kind despite the hard facade."

Who will you ask?" Inquires Fiona.

"You need not worry I think I know just the man for the job." Smiles Nina.

Pulling up to the shop, they are welcomed by an exasperated Evangeline "You are always late!" she bellows as she herds them into the shop.

"We have had quite a day Evangeline; do not add to our stresses please."

Nina catches Evangeline up as Fiona tries on the dress Nina herself designed.

"Well that is a predicament you have found yourself in Nicolette. Do you have a certain someone in mind?" Evangeline eyes her suspiciously.

"Perhaps" smiles Nina.

Fiona steps out of the dressing room and both women fawn over her.

"You are a vision, Fiona, just stunning!!! The color is perfection, Evangeline you have outdone yourself."

"Oui, mon chere, but it is your design that is spectacular, seductive and sweet all at the same time.

After the ball you will not have to worry about your current problem ever again."

Fiona blushes in her peach colored gown, unlike her previous gown which resembled a sunrise this one has all the colors of a sunset. Peaches and pinks and yellows, the dyeing of the fabric is brilliant to say the least. The gown is a simple empress style gown with caped sleeves and a square neckline. Pearls and crystals cover the bodice and became sparse as ones gaze travels downward.

"Put yours on Nina, I wish to see it." Exclaims Fiona.

"Have all the alterations been made?" inquires Nina.

"Yes they have, do not delay I have yet to see it on you" says Evangeline as she shoos her off to her private room.

"Nina steps out in an exquisite blue silver gown, unlike Fiona's Nina's is an A-line corseted at the top and flowing outward from the hip. Her gown is made up of two layers; the underlay being a sky blue, a bright and striking color. The bodice is a strapless sweetheart corset, a silver gauze like material makes up the

second layer which is overlays the blue. The see-through material covers the entire gown, from the high collar to the plunging v-neck which ends just below her navel, exposing the underlying bodice to her fingertips where the sleeves end.

"My goodness Nina, this is … words escape me I…"

Evangeline interjects "It is brilliant, I was unsure how the silver would be, the way you have combined with the raw silk, it looks like a spider web of silver moonlight, it is enchanting. You will surely be the talk of the ball."

After a few modifications to the original designs Nina and Fiona depart from the shop still a buzz with excitement of the day. Nina drops off Fiona and continues on home, glad for the peace and quiet to contemplate how to exactly go about procuring a chaperone for her young friend.

Chapter 10

At Water's Edge - Chapter 12 Part II

Hello all! As promised here is Part II of Chapter 12. I would like to acknowledge LuuuuvmyGrell & bluelady15 for responding to my post. It is thanks to them that this is up at all. This chapter was going to be much longer ,taking you through the Queens Ball but I thought that you guys deserved a treat so I thought it be fun to post what I have, and it seemed like a good place to break the chapter.

As always I thank you in advance for reading but I beg you to click that button and VOTE when you are done and if you LOVED IT please let me know by leaving me a comment. It’s you guys who drive me to keep writing.

Love always JoJo

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tears flow, laying directly under the portal she lets her guard down completely and cries her heart out for the first time in ages. Eventually the tears dry up and she lays there in silence listening to her surroundings, she closes her eyes and every once in a while she faintly hears a familiar sound; cars speeding down the highway; a plane grumbling through the sky, a child screaming in glee.

She sighs as a smile spreads on her face, her hand caresses the wavering air surrounding the portal "I'll be home soon, I promise. I miss you all so much, it breaks me in two not to be able to tell you, to comfort you. I'm so selfish enjoying myself here when you are worried senseless for me. How I would love to give you something to comfort you, to tell you I'm ok and that we will be together soon."

An idea comes to her, she sits up and turns to the portal, rips a piece of paper out of her portfolio and with her kohl pencil writes a short note, pulling a ribbon out of her hair she ties it to a stick and launches it into the portal. Smiling weakly she gets back on her knees with some sense of accomplishment,

wipes her face fixing it so no one would know she had been crying. Before turning to leave she kisses her hand and presses it to the gateway "I love you and think of you every moment of everyday, it tears me apart to be away from you. But I know we will see each other one day soon only that thought keeps me going, till then."

Nina stands and pulls her hand away from the void noting that it feels like your pushing through the surface of the water, but it's really more like air, tangible yet not "How curious" she whispers to herself. With one last look back she turns and makes her way towards the manor, her heart feeling just a bit lighter.

Approaching the manor she enters through the kitchen luckily no one is there and she is able to continue on to her room undisturbed. Walking up the servants stairs she contemplates her new obstacle, figuring out how to ask Steven to be Fiona's escort.

'He shouldn't be too objective to it' she thinks to herself 'I will just have to explain to him this isn't an attempt at matchmaking rather it's a favor to me

one that I promise to repay at a later date. I don't want to involve the Dowager or Vanessa; the less they know the more plausible my argument will be. Yes perfect! Now I just have to figure how to get him alone to ask him. I rather not ask him with everyone there, just in case he is appalled, I rather deal with the embarrassment on my own. Though perhaps if it comes to that everyone will come to my defense and help me convince him. But then he might feel pressured to say yes. NO I will ask him privately; perhaps I'll ask him to join me for a walk, I think that would be best'. Entering her room she begins to ready herself for dinner, happy that she has come up with a possible solution.

Whilst Olivia is putting final touches to her hair Nina hears a noise outside her door. She walks over and opens the door only to find Steven and Nicki arguing. As soon as they see her they stop mid insult and bow before her. Steven extends his hand to her whilst Nicki blatantly disregarding propriety, grabs her hand and pulls her after him.

“Nicki that was rude” she scolds him openly, turning back to Steven with a smile upon her lips mouths an apology. Steven catches up to them and takes her free hand looping it over his and together they descend the stairs.

Annoyed Nicki begins “He “ nodding to Steven “needs to learn his limitations.”

Without looking at Nicki Steven retorts “and you need to realize you do not own her.”

Nicki grinds his teeth in frustration.

Nina whispers “Really Nicki, calm down this is all a bit excessive.”

Before she knows it they are at the threshold of the dining hall neither man wishing to concede to the other yet, all three cannot enter together. Frustrated Nina lets go of both men and walks in by herself leaving the two men in the hall as servants scramble to open the second door.

Shaking her head she sits herself down without either m a n’s assistance. Vanessa’s eyebrow goes up in

question while the two grumble their way to their seats.

Nina mouths to her "Don't ask" as she shakes her head.

The dinner goes on smoothly enough, most of the conversation is centered around the upcoming ball. After desert the women venture outdoors like they did the previous night while the men take their leave in the study for cigars and port.

Vanessa takes Nina's arm and they walk out together "What was that display earlier?"

"Oh that, well it appears that those two are all t o o anxious to get at one another. I have no idea what has gotten into Nicki, he has never behaved like this. He is overly protective, he won't let Steven near me. They bicker constantly, if I didn't know better I would say they were both vying for my attentions but I know Nicki isn't."

Vanessa laugh "Well perhaps he is taking his role as a friend very seriously".

“He is more like a big brother scaring all my suitors away.”

Vanessa’s eyebrow goes up “Do you consider Steven a suitor?”

“What….No I didn’t mean it like that . NO , no Vanessa! I just don’t want them to be like this because of me.”

“Well it appears that it isn’t up to you my love. I will speak to Nicki if you wish.”

“No , I will do that on my own, perhaps I should speak to both of them separately.”

“If you wish my dear” s miles Vanessa as he leads Nina to the table where the Dowager is seated.

In what seems like no time at all the men come out to join them on the terrace, Nicki leading the pack makes his way directly to Nina’s side.

She takes him by the arm and leads him away from the group. They walk towards the other side of the grounds but stay on the balcony.

“What is troubling you?” Nina asks stopping in her track searching his face for answers.

He pulls her deeper into the shadows his face contorting as his emotions flash across "I just…he is… I can't… NO I won't…!"

Nina laughs "Can you form a sentence, please?"

"It isn't funny" he looks her square in the eye but her laugh changes his disposition drastically as he joins her in a heartwarming chuckle.

She takes his face in her hands "Darling, what is the matter, you can talk to me please, I hate seeing you like this."

"I just do not wish to see you hurt. He isn't like me…" he says in all seriousness and then smiles cockily in that infamous Nicki way "Let's face it no one is" he boasts which has Nina crack up "all humor aside, I deeply care for you and I do not wish for you to be hurt by his games. He is no better than his brother."

"And is Decklyn so bad, look how happy Vanessa is."

"Perhaps I should rephrase my statement; he is no better than Decklyn was before Vanessa settled him down. He was a rogue like no other; he left many

broken hearts in his wake. I do not wish that for you mon coeur , I love you too deeply."

Bashfully smiling she smooth's out his lapels "I know and I love you just as much and I appreciate you looking out for me like a good big brother but you must not come on so strong. Do not fear me losing my heart to him or anyone, the only time I shall fear for my heart is when the season comes to an end and I must leave you all. Are we all sorted now?" she questions looking him square in the eye again.

He nods his head, Nina stands on her tippy toes and kisses his cheek, he brings his arms around her lifting her off the ground spinning them both until Nina is squealing in glee. He sets her down and flashes her his most alluring smile, she smacks his arm but grabs for it once more as she is still dizzy, arm in arm they walk back and rejoin the crowd.

Vanessa approaches Nina and in hushed whisper asks "I trust the matter is resolved?"

"Yes I believe it is, he was just concerned that Steven will steal my heart, isn't he just the sweetest thing?"

“Hmmm… yes very.”

Rejoining the crowd Nina catches Stevens eye, he smiles at her and before she knows it he has materialized at her side.

“Hello” she says in surprise.

“How are you enjoying the evening?” he asks.

“Very much, thank you.” She politely retorts.

Looking up at him she continues “It is a beautiful night for a turn in the gardens, would you be so kind as to escort me? I would venture a stroll on my own but one never knows what dangers lay in wait in the shadows.” She giggles as he chuckles at her statement, the rest of their party observes the exchange curiously.

Stevens eyes never leave her face, he eagerly accepts extending her his arm. Nina turns one last time looking straight at Nicki sends him a pleading look to behave, he nods his head before turning to the bar and poring himself yet another drink.

Vanessa seeing the silent exchange walks over to Nicki places her hand on the decanter he has managed to drain all on his own.

"She will be fine, he won't ravage her in the rose bushes for heaven's sake. You are behaving as if he is some sort of fiend."

"I know" he whispers in defeat.

"Good then come now and regale us with one of your adventures."

Steven leads them down towards the gazebo, as they get further away from their group Nina becomes more and more nervous, 'oh just spit it our Nina, stop being a baby!' she scolds herself.

"Are you looking forward to the ball your Grace?"
He looks at her cocking an eyebrow.

"I mean Steven. Steven are you looking forward to the ball, it seems to be all anyone is discussing."

"I would be looking forward to it more if I was fortunate to be escorting a beauty such as yourself."

Shocked at his forwardness Nina is rendered speechless, unsure how to answer even if her voice would allow it.

Regaining her composure she quips "You are most kind in you accolades, though I would imagine you would have no trouble procuring a partner, any young lady would be over the moon to be escorted by the 'devilishly handsome Earl of Glenmore'" she laughs imitating the Dowager.

Steven stops in his tracts "You deem me devilishly handsome?"

"Oh no I was just reiterating the Dowagers praises."

"So you do not find me appealing?" he ask confused.

"Steven" she whispers as her heart beats wildly in her chest. For once she is grateful for the shadows which are concealing her face and the flush which is now most prominent on her cheeks.

"If you are hoping to have me exalt your ego Sir, I will not give you that satisfaction"

He smiles " Touché M ademoiselle"

“In all seriousness you have no one to escort?” she looks up at him through her lashes.

" No I do not, if I cannot have you I shant want anyone.”

“Oh…” her plans of his escorting Fiona quickly crumble.

“I was being facetious” he answers quickly seeing her disappointed expression.

“In that instance I have a proposition for you” she says as she walks up the steps of the gazebo.

“A proposition?”

“Yes, a close friend of mine, a very sweet girl is without escort I was hoping that you would be so kind as to accompany her to the ball.”

He begins to answer she holds up her hand “Before you answer I need to you know that this is in no way my attempt in matchmaking or anything of the sort. If you accept I would consider it a personal favor to me, one that I would more than gladly repay to you in the future.”

He walks towards her smiling "A repayment, what sort of repayment would I receive?"

Nina smiles knowing all too well what he is hinting at "Whatever you would deem proper for such a request."

As he closes in on her she deftly escapes him "Your answer please sir, the window of time this offer is available to you is closing."

He leans against the post, crosses his arms on his chest and stares at her in contemplation.

"What did my mother and sister in law have to say to your proposition?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"I never told them. I dared not inform the Dowager she would most likely be planning your wedding if she got wind of this."

He laughs whole heartedly "Yes, she most certainly would be selecting names for the Christening of my unborn children."

Nina laughs with him "Undoubtedly she would."

“I do.”

“You do?” Nina ask confused.

“I accept you offer.”

“You do! But you do not know on whose behalf I am asking.” She says confused.

“It is irrelevant, I am doing this because you asked, not who the girl is.”

“Really, OH Thank you!!!” she leaps at him and hugs him.

Shocked by her actions he is momentarily frozen but quickly the warmth of her body pressed against his thaws him and he returns her affections. She pulls away slightly to look up at him “Thank you” she whispers as the most captivating smile spreads upon her delicately sculpted lips.

He nods not able to form words at the nearness of her; her smile disarms him as her arms entrap him.

‘What is the matter with you, no woman has such power over you wake up and be a man for heaven’s sake’ he thinks to himself.

She lets go of him and he follows suit.

Nina begins to walk towards the stairs prompting him to follow, at her beckon he pushes off the railing eagerly falling in step with her.

“Do you wish to know about the young Miss.?”

“Yes” he answers eagerly not caring in the least about the girl but he revels in the sound of Nina’s voice and her attention.

They walk on leisurely as Nina explains animatedly Fiona’s predicament. He hangs on to her every word fascinated by her frank demeanor, now he understands why Nicholas is so adamant to hold fast to this enchanting creature. She is humorous, thoughtful and intelligent for the first time in what seems like forever he is actually interested in something a woman has to say. Unlike the majority of the women of the ton she can hold an intelligent conversation moreover, is able to hold his attentions on a topic he isn’t interested in at all.

Lost in his thought a name peaks his curiosity "She is the daughter of Lord and Lady Dartmouth, they passed away in an unfortunate accident and…"

"Lord Edward Dartmouth?" he questions.

"Yes! Are you familiar with the family?"

"Not with his family but with the Lord yes, he was my mentor of sorts when I first began managing my own funds. He was the only one willing to invest in my business ventures, when not even my own brother would. I do recall he had a daughter and a son… Fiona and Jacob."

"Yes that is correct, oh how wonderful that you have a connection to the family, this will make our meeting with Contessa Parish that much easier."

"Meeting?"

"Yes we will be having high noon tea with her and Fiona tomorrow. The Contessa is their guardian and she wishes to approve the gentleman that I found; you will have to charm her for the privileged of escorting her ward. I am sure you will have no trouble doing so, though your reputation does precede you. You will

have to be the perfect gentleman the Contessa is a stickler for propriety and manners."

"My reputation?" he asks a sly smile spreading on his face as he attempts to fake shock and surprise.

"Why ever do you think Nicki is being so protective" she laughs "Speaking of Nicki he must be pacing like a caged lion in anticipation of our return, we best pick up our pace."

"He doesn't trust me with you? Or..." he pulls on her hand drawing her to him "Or does he not trust you would be able to resist my charms?" His arms envelop her; she is momentarily stunned to find him holding her so intimately. She looks around the brightly lit patch they have found themselves in, looking towards the manor she sees Nicki staring at them intently.

'Oh crap' she thinks to herself.

She pushes out of Stevens embrace "He doesn't trust you, he knows I can more than handle myself" she continues speaking over her shoulder as she walks on alone "you should know yourself Sir, as you have had

first-hand experience what happens to men who try something that they shouldn't."

Steven chuckles, the quietness of the night carries the sound toward the terrace and Nina smiles as she walks up the steps. Not wishing to favor either man she sits with the children and entertains them for a bit. Vanessa attempts to probe her for what happened but Nina is mum on the subject.

After a while she tries to catch Nicki's eye but he is stubbornly avoiding her all together, intently focusing on his drink or rather lack thereof.

Nina notices the Dowager looking between her and Steven, not liking the attention she decides to focus the conversation on Steven, as a punishment for his earlier misbehavior.

"Have you told everyone the wonderful news Steven?"

"What news Steven" asks the Dowager vexed she is the last to learn news regarding her son.

He gives Nina a hard look of exasperation, in turn Nina stares him down smiling vindictively.

“Why he has decided to escort a certain young lady to the Queens Ball!”

The Dowager approaches Steven “Oh Steven how wonderful, who is she; do we know her … oh there is hope yet!!”

Nina giggles to herself seeing his pained expression; she stands up and excuses herself for the night leaving him alone to explain to his mother.

Chapter 11

At Water's Edge - Chapter 13

Chapter 13

The next morning Nina takes time to get herself ready smiling to herself thinking of the mess she left poor Steven in.

‘He totally deserved it but I’m sure that the dowager has let up since then.’

Satisfied with what she sees in the mirror Nina makes her way down the stairs, as she does she hears the Dowager whining “Steven why the mystery?”

Exasperated Steven answers “Mother if you persist I will not take anyone at all and I shall be the only

bachelor not in attendance. When Auntie asks why I shall inform her that is was all due to your incessant pestering."

The Dowager huffs and puffs and eventually backs down when she sees Nina join them.

Making a beeline for Nina she inquires "How did you sleep my dear?"

Nina laughs at Stevens annoyance "Very well your Grace, so kind of you to inquire."

Steven makes his way to Nina offering her his hand and escorting her away from his mother.

"A fine mess you left me in last night" he whispers and all Nina can do is nod in agreement.

"Was it really necessary?"He continues.

Nina quaffs "Was it really necessary for you to grab for me so intimately when we were finally in the sight of the manor, more over Nicki?"

"Oh..." he smiles rubbing his neck while contemplating his response "No I wager it was not. Though in my

defense I was grabbing for you all night it is just that you so deftly escaped me every time."

"Ahhh… yes well perhaps you should alter your hunting strategies as they are obviously lacking" she says in all seriousness but with a twinkle in her eye.

As the family begins to sit down to break their fast the Dowager insists on sitting next to Nicolette. Leaning over she whispers "My dear who is this girl?"

Looking up she captures Stevens gaze, "Curiosity killed the cat your Grace" Nina laughs "Patience is a virtue, all will be revealed in due time."

Steven eats with an urgency that is making even the children laugh. He stops to take a breath when he catches Nina's inquisitive eye.

"Are you in a hurry?" asks Nina.

"I had hoped to take you for a short ride before we had our appointed meeting."

"Oh… yes I think that I would like that very much perhaps we can go tomorrow or at a later date I still have some things to finalize before the ball. Nicki had

taken me some time ago but I would like to see more of the country side. Perhaps the beaches below the cliffs, I do miss the ocean terribly."

"Very well shall we depart?"

Steven comes around and pulls out her chair; taking her hand he places it upon his and whispers in her ear "As long as I am in your company I shall agree to anything my lady."

Nina blushes at his comment but tries to compose herself as she nods towards the Dowager, the Duke and Duchess and lastly she sets her eyes upon Nicki. Pulling out of Stevens grasp and places a chaste kiss upon Nicki's cheek whispering "please smile for me."

He smiles patting the hand she placed on his shoulder.

Steven had the stable hands ready the open coach allowing them to enjoy the warm spring day. Handling the horses masterfully, he points out interesting tidbits on their ride. Every opportunity he has he moves in just a bit closer, taking sharp turns he forces Nina to slide over closer or lean into him as he wraps his free hand around her steadying her.

‘I know what he is doing but I will allow it for the time being as it is all so innocent and truth be told I would be lying if I told you I wasn’t enjoying all of this attention. Never in my life have I had such beautiful, stunningly gorgeous men fight over me I do have to say it is a rather exhilarating.’ *Nina smiles to herself at her silly thoughts.*

Before they even know it they are before the doors of Fiona’s home, the Contessa already waiting expectantly for them in the foyer.

“Good day to you Contessa” says Nina “May I introduce to you The Earl of Glenmore Steven Wakefield” turning towards Steven she continues Steven this is Contessa Gertrude Parrish the great aunt of Lady Fiona Dartmouth the young lady you will be escorting.”

“That is yet to be determined, Miss Martin” says the Contessa eyeing Steven apprehensively.

Nina smiles as a slight shock flutters across Stevens face, for once a matriarch isn’t enthralled that he has come to call on a young lady of her house.

“Where is Lady Fiona?” inquires Nicolette.

“She is upstairs awaiting my call I wished to speak to the Earl beforehand.”

“You may ask whatever you wish of me Contessa, I am an open book” Smiles Steven his most disarmingly charming smile.

“What are your intentions Sir? My great niece is a proper and chaste young lady she is not one of your harlots for you to romp about with. I will not have you soil her reputation with your philandering ways.”

Stevens’s mouth is agape but he recovers quickly “My intentions are of the purest kind. Miss Martin has asked me to escort the young lady and I was most flattered that she though so highly of me to ask. I would consider it a great privilege to escort the daughter of Lord Edward Dartmouth; for he was my mentor and a great man. If I could repay his kindness in any way my soul would be lighter and I would consider my debt paid. Your ladyship I would be most content to be a proper and curious escort to the young lady. Miss Martin has explained that the Lady Dartmouth has had much misfortune not participating

in the common gatherings her peers have taken for granted. Now that her health has improved I will consider it an honor and a privilege if I could introduce her to the ton and make all the young men regret not paying her the attention she deserves."

Before the Contessa could rebuttal Nina speaks her mind as well.

"When I told the Earl that Fiona was the Lords daughter he was most instant that I allow him the honor. He spoke so highly of Fiona's late father that I knew that he would do everything in his power to make sure that Fiona is content and well looked after. She will want for nothing as all of his attentions will be focused on her, and I am certain that the young men will fall all over themselves to be by her side. Especially now that one of the most sought after bachelors in all of England has bestowed his attentions upon her. She will have no trouble procuring escorts for the remainder of the season, of that I am certain" says Nina with conviction.

"If it was up to me I would say no to your ever kind offer your Lordship, but as it may be I have once before

taken advice from Miss Martin and she had not led me astray. Therefore, it is only because she thought so highly of you that I will allow you to escort my Fiona. Mark my words young Earl if you do anything to taint my Fiona's reputation in any way I will make you regret it. I may be old but there is still plenty of fight in these old bones" the Contessa harps with conviction.

Turning to the maid she bellows "Call for my grand niece please."

Fiona enters as the tea is being poured; she kisses her auntie and stands before Steven and Nicolette in a deep curtsy.

"Your lordship" she says nervously.

"I am elated to finally make your acquaintance Lady Fiona" says Steven as he bows before her, takes her hand and places an innocent kiss upon it.

"Save all that and the like for the ball, let us have our tea" harps the Contessa instructing Fiona to sit beside her.

"You mean that he Earl will be my escort auntie" exclaims Fiona in surprise.

“Yes he will and he best behave or he and I shall have most unpleasant dealings going forth, you have been warned Sir.”

Steven hides a smile as he answers her back in all seriousness “I will be on my best behavior I assure you.”

Fiona blushes and looks up at the Earl under her lashes “You are most kind to offer your services your lordship. I am most fortunate to have such a kind and handsome escort.”

Nina watches the exchange and smiles happily glad to be able to help her young friend.

“The pleasure and honor is all mine Lady Fiona, please call me Steven.”

“Thank you Steven” Fiona blushes once more as she flutters her lashes at him.

Nina barely able to suppress a giggle at the change in her friend ‘I have never seen her like this, she is flustered and coquettish, good for her she deserves it.’

As tea time draws to a close Nina and Steven take their leave. Climbing into the coach she asks Steven "I need to pay a visit to Evangeline's dress shop do you mind making that our next stop. You may depart I shall come back with Evangelines coach."

"Will you be there a while?"

"Yes I imagine it will take me a few hours."

"I would have though that as the ball will be so soon upon us you would have procured all necessities by now."

"I have but I still need to finalize Vanessa's dress and Fiona's."

"You are purchasing Vanessa's dress?" he asks confused.

"No, well yes you see I have also designed it, Evangeline and I have started a new business venture thanks to your brother, it is a rather profitable one."

"An entrepreneur" he smiles to himself impressed "how long do you wager you will need?"

"Two hours at most" she answers.

“Excellent I have some business in town that should take approximately that long, I shall come to collect you once I am through. That is unless you prefer to ride home alone.”

“No you will do.” She smiles “if my meeting goes a bit long you wouldn’t mind waiting will you?”

“For you Nicolette I would wait an eternity.”

Nina rolls her eyes but blushes none the less under his intense gaze.

Pulling up to Evangeline’s he escorts her out of the coach and continues onward.

After putting the finishing touches on Vanessa’s dress and finalizing the others two Nina and Evangeline continue with the newest orders. The door bell rings and Nina looks at her watch noting it has been two hours, the familiar voice of Steven drifts to her ear. She and Evangeline sneak a peek at him through the curtains of the main office.

“He is a handsome devil isn’t he?” comments Evangeline.

“Mmm… that he is” smiles Nina “I should go” she continues.

“Nonsense let us make him wait a bit, let us see what he would do.”

They instruct one of the seamstresses to inform him Nina will be another hour before she is ready to go.

He accepts the news graciously and parks himself in one of the chairs in the waiting room. The women of the shop are making any and every excuse to be in his presence but to their disappointment he pays little mind to any of them as he patiently waits for Nicolette.

“Will you look at that the Earl besotted!” exclaims Evangeline.

“Hodgepodge” says Nina “he knows that we are watching so he is on his best behavior.”

“Non... mon cour I have had the Earl here before with many of his ladies and he is a terrible flirt sending my girls into a tizzy. This” she points to him “is not the Earl I see here so often, this is a different man.”

“Well perhaps he has grown out of the tomfoolery.”

“In a few months time I think not my dear, I think not… there is something else afoot.” She smiles at Nina’s perplexed face. Nina looks at him once more before exiting the office and walking towards the parlor.

Steven stands instantly as she enters the room and smiles so hard you would think his face would crack. Nina mirrors his smile takes his hand as she says her goodbye to Evangeline.

As their coach pulls away Evangeline muses “If I had not known better I would say the Earl is smitten with our Nicolette.”

The trip back is a quiet one as Nina contemplates Evangeline’s words.

‘She is wrong he is just being proper perhaps the Countess’s words have struck a nerve with him and he is turning over a new leaf. Yes that must be it, he is really no different from the day I met him. He is…’ she looks up at him as the sun is warming his face and accenting his striking features ‘just Steven’ *she smiles to herself.*

Pulling up to the house the sun is already hanging low in the sky, Steven jumps out of the carriage and swiftly makes his way to her side, he wraps his hands about her waist and helps her down smiling excitedly at her.

"Thank you" Nina says as he takes her hand and places it over his.

The footman comments bowing his head "Your Lordship the family is having the dinner on the balcony tonight."

"Thank you" replies Steven as he pulls her away from the stairs and leads her the long way around the house.

"Let us stretch our legs a bit with a walk around the grounds before we join everyone."

"Yes that would be lovely."

Steven breaks the silence "Would you be so kind as to support my explanation to my mother. I am certain that she will not believe me when I tell her it is merely a kindness to the poor girl. And of course as a favor to you to be paid back later." He ends with a twinkle in

his eye and a seductive smile gracing his lips as he looks away from her.

"Of course, thank you again for doing this. I know you did this out of the kindness of your heart not just so that I am in your debt."

"You give me too much credit my Lady."

"I give credit where credit is due."

Rounding the bend they come upon the family assembling at the outdoor table.

"Nina, Uncle Steven!" cries out Josephine as she flings herself at them.

"Good evening my love" says Nina embracing the child.

"Come sit by me Nina" Josephine drags her over to her side of the table leaving Steven to fend for himself. Fortunately for him there was a spot opposite of Nina. She smiles at him encouragingly urging him to tell his mother but the Dowager beats him to it, giving him a perfect opening.

"Where did the two of you disappear off to today?"

“We were visiting Nicolette’s friend Lady Fiona Dartmouth and the Contessa.”

“Oh how lovely, and how is the child faring?”

“Very well thanks to Nicolette.” Steven smiles proudly at Nicolette.

“And why pray tell were you with Nicolette, did you have business in town and decided to escort Nicolette?”

“Yes I did have business in town but I payed the Contessa and her wards a visit as well.”

“Oh…” the Contessa says in surprise urging Steven to go on as she leans towards him in fascination of his explanation.

“I … well Nicolette…” he looks towards Nina for help.

Nina jumps in “Steven has so kindly accepted the role of escort for Lady Dartmouth. She has been ill as of late and was unable to participate in the events that her peers have and was unable to procure an escort. I asked the Contessa to allow me to help find someone and, well seeing as Steven was free I thought who

better than him to introduce the sweet young Fiona to the ton at the most anticipated night of the season. He so graciously accepted the duty and as per the Contessa's request agreed to a meeting. The Contessa demanded that she approve the escort I choose."

"And of course she was more than elated that my Steven volunteered his services."

Steven begins to explain but Nina cuts him off.

"She was more than delighted and exceedingly grateful."

Steven mouths a thanks you and Nina nods back with a smile as the Dowager goes on a tirade about all of Stevens fine qualities and accomplishments. The look on Declyns face is priceless even Steven has a hardy laugh. The Dowager confused finally stops her musings and the rest of the dinner is a full of laughter and merriment.

The following day after breakfast Nina is called out of the children's playroom by the arrival of Ephraim. She leaves the children and makes her way out to the tree with the young physicist.

“Miss Nicolette how have you been fairing?”

“Very well Mr. Scott, and yourself?”

“Excellent, I have made much headway with the portal.” He replies excitedly.

“You have!”

“Yes, I have completed numerous experiments and it appears that the portal is stable. According to the items we were able to extract from the other side it seems that time is running parallel.”

“You mean that I have been missing for two months now?”

“Yes my dear!” he quips animatedly.

“When will I be able to pass through?”

“Are you eager to leave us so soon?” He replies with a certain amount of sadness and disappointment in his voice.

“No, of course not it is just that I miss my family terribly.”

“Naturally, but have you not made a new family here as well, I am certain they will miss you just as much if you leave them now. I know I certainly would.” He ends his eyes downcast as a flush begins to spread across his face.

“Oh Ephraim” she pats his hand “you are far too sweet” she says as she smiles genuinely at him. “What would I do without you.”

“I wager you would have risked life and limb and passed through the portal a long time ago.”

“Yes perhaps I would have, who knows.”

“I only ask that you contain yourself for a little while longer. There are a few more experimental tests I would like to perform before I allow you to pass through. Furthermore, I need to calculate if the portal is expanding or shrinking or if it is holding steady, in order to give you a proper window of time in order to have a safe trip back home.”

“Yes of course I would not mind staying in the least if I knew that doing so would not hinder me eventually going home. You do not know how grateful I am that

you have undertaken this challenge, and that you are working so diligently. Moreover, thank you for keeping my secret."

Just as those words escape her lips she turns to the sound of her name being called.

"Nicolette!" Steven calls out as his horse trots closer.

Shielding her eyes from the sun Nina looks up surprised by his unexpected visit.

"Whatever are you doing here?" He asks as he dismounts and is standing before her looking at Ephraim.

"I do not believe I have made your acquaintance Sir, I am Steven Wakefield" he says as he extends his hand to Ephraim.

"Oh my terrible manners Steven this is Mr. Ephraim Scott."

"Pleasure to meet you, any friend for Nicolette's is a friend of mine.' He smiles warmly yet scrutinizes him warily with his gaze.

Ephraim stands up to his full height extending his chest outwardly like a proud peacock as he shakes the Earls hand, the image of which makes Nicolette stifle a laugh.

“Steven whatever are you doing here?”

“I have come to steal you away for a ride, it is a beautiful day and I thought that we could make our way to the beach” he smiles brightly.

“Yes …I…well I do believe that we are through here, are we not?” she looks over to Ephraim who nods his head.

“We are Miss. Martin though I will say on for a bit longer, if that is alright with you.”

“Yes of course, are you certain you will not need me I really do no mind staying.”

Stevens’s hopes are dashed as those simple words pass her lips.

“No, I insist that you go with Mr. Wakefield you deserve to enjoy yourself if it is only for a little while.

Before Nina can ever reply Steven sweeps her up and helps her on to her horse.

"It was a pleasure Mr. Scott I hope to see you again."

"Yes the pleasure is all mine your Lordship."

Taking the rains Nina and Steven trot away.

Throughout the ride Steven is being more chatty than usual, the route they take is visually stunning.

"You ride very well Miss Martin."

"Thank you I have had a very good instructor."

"Have you now, and who pray tell would the lucky man be? Is it old man Jones, he taught us all I really must commend him."

"No, not Mr. Jones."

"Oh…" looking over to her he sees her look away.

"Well then it must be Devereux then… I must say he did a fine job, one would never tell you have not been riding for ages."

"I will make sure to share your praises. The view is breathtaking, thank you for taking me."

“It is my pleasure, I hope that I was not taking you away from any pressing matters.”

“No, we were just finalizing some last minute items. Ephraim has some more work to do I doubt I would have been able to be of much assistance to him, he tries to involve me more but it is all a bit above my level of understanding. I do think he prefers to use me as a sounding board.”

“Have you been working with Mr. Scott for very long?”

“A few months now.”

“And if you don’t mind me asking, what is it that you are working on to be exact?”

‘Sugar plums!!! What am I going to say?!?!? Quick think of something, quick….’

“We …he… has been working on some interesting theories about electromagnetic fields and I have always been fascinated with the sciences, he has taken me on as an apprentice of sorts. Though I’m sure if you ask him he would tell you that I am instrumental to his research.”

“Have you been spending much time with him?”

“Yes we have worked quite closely.”

“He seemed hesitant to let you go.”

“Nonsense!” Nina exclaims trying to change the subject. “Do you come often to the cliffs?”

“No, I have not since I was a child. Declyn and I would often come here with our nurse maid. She would take us swimming when the weather was warm, we weren’t allowed to tell mother as she was quite fearful of the water, he brother drowned as a child.”

“I am so sorry.”

“It happened a long time ago but I do not think my mother ever got truly recovered from the loss.”

Their horses gallop along the water’s edge as the sun sinks lower in the evening sky. Slowing down his steed he leaps off, takes off his shoes and rolls up his pant legs.

“Whatever are you doing?”

“I wish to test the water” he says as he walks over to her mare grabs the rains pulling both horses closer to the water.

Nina giggles “Is it cold?”

Steven laughs as a rogue wave splashes against him wetting him up to his knees. “It is refreshing” he says wincing as the next wave laps his ankles.

“Ha, ha, ha… you don’t look too convincing.”

“No?” He laughs taking her by the waist and pulling her down to him just as the next wave hits them.

Nina squeals in laughter “My shoes!! My dress! Ahhhhhh…..You lied its frigid!!”

Steven chuckles heartily as she holds on to him, slowly he sets her down as the waves continue to roll upon the shore. Nina runs towards the beach takes off her shoes and leaves them to dry, running back to the water. Steven lets the horses go and has joined her in the shallow water as she kicks up the water with her legs. A strong waive crashes upon the shore Nina jumps up evading it but manages to kick up the water wetting Steven from head to toe. He yelps as the cold

water hits him "You!!! Oh I'm going to get you!" he exclaims as he begins to chase her along the shore. Nina squeals in glee hiking her skirts up as she runs away from him.

She is quite successful in evading him as usual though as she turns to see if he is advancing she spies him gaining on her, before she knows it he tackles her from behind. They fall together rolling on the beach in absolute hysterics of laughter. When they finally come to a stop Nina finds herself laying on top of Steven her hands braced upon his chest, his arms encircling her holding her firmly against him. They are both grinning like fools, panting, their breaths intermingling as both attempt to calm their breathing but the longer they lay there in the compromising position the quicker their breathing becomes. Especially Nina's when she realizes that she is mere millimeters from his laughing eyes and seductive lips.

Steven breaks the silence "Finally I have managed to catch you; I guess the trick was to get you out of your shoes."

Bracing herself on her elbows she pushes against him attempting to get up. Seeing her try to escape him Steven rolls them over pinning her beneath him. The sudden movement surprised her; she grips tightly to his shirt, holding herself against him.

"Did you really think that I would let you go so quickly after all the time I have spent chasing you" he whispers in her ear as he raises himself up off her with one hand braced beside her head and the other planted firmly in the sand by her waist.

Smirking she replies "Well I wager congratulations are in order" with a cool demeanor while her insides are screaming.

"Yes, though some form of reward would be most appreciated."

"Reward!" she exclaims "I do not recall offering one for my capture."

He smirks catching a loose tendril of her hair securing it behind her ear, his hand lingering upon her cheek "No" he pretends to be shocked, with a dark gleam in

his eye he continues “well how about one for your safe return.”

Raising herself on her elbows she forces him to pull further away to her mild disappointment.

“Should I be concerned about my safety? Are there rogues prowling the shores as well?” she mocks him by looking about surveying the beach.

Steven chuckles “Like the forest there is no safe place for such a beauty, all men become rogues when a woman such as yourself is in their presence.”

“Well then I best relieve you of the burden of my presence so that you may be a gentleman once more.”

“I rather you not, I quite enjoy playing the rogue" he rebuffs not wanting to let her go. He looks deep into her eyes, secretly pleading for her to say. Momentarily she is paralyzed by his nearness, hypnotized by the intensity of his gaze, the innocent way he holds her face as his thumb rhythmically brushes her cheek.

His gaze now saturated with passion travels to her lips, Nina’s breath hitches in her throat at the change, she completely forgets how to breathe, her heart

skipping beats with anticipation. Nina's eyes continue to travel lower to his mouth, as he wet's his lips she groans inwardly at the sight just then her brain kick-starts and begins screaming 'get out of there, this cannot be good for you this is exactly what you have been trying to avoid. NINA STOP THIS INSTANT!!!'

Snapping out of it she panics when she sees him tilt his head bringing his lips down to hers, helpless she is conflicted. 'Can one kiss be so bad' *she contemplates* 'one soft, innocent, wet on the beach with a ridiculously hot guy, can it really be that bad… YES!!!' *her subconscious screams at her.*

Not knowing what to do she grabs on to his shirt he takes it as a sign of her acceptance and just as their lips are about to connect Nina flips them so that she is on top once more. Before he can even open his eyes, Nina is off him sprinting to her shoes, she grabs them without stopping and runs for her horse.

Finally realizing what has happened Steven jumps up and runs after her. Once he reaches his horse he jumps up into the saddle and gallops after her. Catching up he rides parallel to her calling her name but she does not

turn towards him. Unwilling to let her runoff once more before they have a chance to discuss what has happened he rides closer to her and grabs for her reigns. Bringing both horses to a stop he dismounts and stands before her whispering "Please accept my most sincerest apologies for my behavior, I should not have abused the situation. Nina please look at me, please" he begs.

She shakes her head "I am so embarrassed, I should not have allowed this to happen. Please let us not discuss it, it shall never happen again" she laughs uncomfortably "nothing really happened therefore; there is no need for apologies."

Confused Steven nods in agreement "No nothing you… we… we shall not speak of it."

Nina looks at him and smiles weakly "we shant".

The rest of the ride is quiet but not for long as Steven with his usual antics gets her to smile and by the time they reach the manor it is as if truly nothing happened at all.

Dear D,

I just want to die... I don't know what is worse that it almost happened, that I stopped it or the fact that I have to pretend that he didn't just try to kiss me in the most romantic, sweep me off my feet kind of way. If I tried to write the scene it couldn't have made it more perfect, he captures me we roll about in the sand laughing; coming to a stop we stare deep into each other's eyes as passion swells until it can't be bridled any longer and as the waives crash upon the shore so do his lips to mine. Sounds corny I know like something out of a harlequin novel but my God it was anything but. If I let it happen 'From here to Eternity' would have had nothing on us.

How do I get myself into these situations!! Easy gorgeous men literally throwing themselves at me and I have to beat them off with a stick, why could this not have happened to me back home. No, I had to wait and come two hundred years into the past before I could get this kind of attention. Grrrrr... sooooo NOT FAIR!!! Now I'm gonna go home and what, this will all be like an amazingly realistic dream, that will slowly fade until all I am left with are the memories which will slowly wither away until I can barely remember

anything at all. Will they remember me or will I become just a distant memory? Will they think of me and wonder where I went or how I am? Ephraim was right I will miss all of them as much as I miss my family now…Not fair, not fair at all.

Well enough for now I have to get to bed the ball is tomorrow and I need my beauty sleep. I wonder if I will dream of what could have been, I would be lying if I said I wasn't hoping. Oh well…

Sweet at water's edge passionate kisses to you.

Love Nina!

Chapter 12

At Water's Edge - Chapter 14.1

Chapter 14 .1

‘He cradles my face gently in his hands; his gaze penetrates deep into my soul revealing all my wants and needs, his breathing accelerates as he realizes they mirror his own. His gaze travels to my parted lips, my breath hitches in my throat as he wet’s his lips. Caressing my cheek he lowers his face until his lips are mere millimeters from my own, I prepare myself for a sweet surrender. Smiling that cocky grin he bridges the gap and…’

“Rise and shine!” belts out Olivia as she pulls the curtains letting in the morning sun.

"NOOOOOOOO…nooooooooooooo" Nina groans pulling a pillow over her head trying to block out the sun. She burrows herself deeper into the sheets trying to recover the dream and follow through with the ending.

"No my dear it's time to get up there is much to do before tonight's festivities, up, up, up with you." Olivia Laughs as she pulls the sheets off Nina.

"It's not fair, just not fair I was so close, I can't even get what I want in my dreams" Nina wines slamming her arms on the bed as she stares up at the gilded ceiling.

"I am sorry Miss but it really is time to get up. Breakfast is being brought up I need you to eat well, as most likely you will not get much more for the remainder of the day. I am preparing the bath and after last night's shenanigans we shall have to scrub you raw, until your skin is soft and supple. Evangeline has already brought all of the gowns, they are stunning, I know I say it every time but you truly have outdone yourself."

"Thank you" Nina replies shyly.

The maid knocks at the door and enters with the breakfast; Nina eats more than her fill.

For the remainder of the day she is scrubbed, plucked, powdered, oiled, brushed, quaffed, corseted and finally dressed. To her surprise not once does anyone invade her room, she was certain Vanessa would not stay away after learning that she spent the afternoon in Stevens company.

"Where is the Duchess?" Nina inquires.

"She has her hands full making sure everything is ready for tonight her Grace gave me a message to relay to you."

"And what would that be?"

"It is a rather strange one but she said you would understand its meaning, she said 'Lucy you got some splaning to do'."

"No she didn't" Nina squeals barely able to contain he laughter. "Did she really say it like that! That is priceless, go figure she would remember that of all the things I've taught her."

Olivia looks on with a perplexed expression "Whatever are you going on about Miss Nicolette? What was her Grace referring to, and who is this, this Lucy?"

Catching her breath from all the laughing "Oh Livy that is a well know expression where I come from, it means that I will have to explain myself. Vanessa has no time today I gather tomorrow will be a very long day, as Vanessa will be having her very own inquisition."

"She is living vicariously through you, her Grace loves you deeply I have never seen her take to someone so quickly. Why if someone didn't know better they would say you were sister or at the very least that you have been by each other's side since the day you were born."

"I am thankful for all that she has done for me, never in my life did I ever expect such kindness and love."

"Well my dear I do believe you are done."

"Already!"

"Let us get that gown on you and you can see how beautiful you are."

As she steps into her the gown Olivia buttons her in and Nina looks up into the mirror. She sees herself done up in a way she has not been before.

Her hair is brushed to a high gloss, curled in rich waves, Nicki's combs are intertwined on the right side holding up her hair away from her face. The hair on her left is curled from root to tip falling in luxurious uniform curls down her shoulders. Noting how her skin is glowing Nina finally takes in the whole picture and affords herself a look in her best creation yet. It fits her as if it was drawn on her body; the silver overlay makes her look ethereal.

"Miss you are glorious, your gown is the most enchanting thing I have ever seen and I have been a maid for some time. Off you go down to the balcony the Duke is having a small gathering before you all depart."

"Thank you Livy, I know not how you make me so beautiful every time."

"It isn't hard at all my dear, when one is as attractive as you. Now go, I am certain they cannot wait to see you."

Nina makes her way down nervously, but manages to compose herself by the time she reaches the doors. She takes a deep breath and steps on into the moonlight drenched balcony. All eyes turn to her and she bashfully averts her eyes from her audience.

Vanessa is first to approach her, she grabs her by her hands and whispers "You are breathtaking; try not to break too many hearts tonight."

Stepping away from her friend Nina laughs "I will try my hardest not to, now let me see your dress! Oh you look divine in it, do you like it?"

"Like it! I adore it, it is the most stunning work I have seen in ages." Vanessa gushes.

Declyn joins his wife by her side "Miss Martin you are very beautiful tonight, why if I was not shackled and chained I would brawl with any and every man here tonight to have the great fortune to be at your side."

"You are most magnanimous your Grace."

As the two of them step away Nicki makes his way to her. He bows before her taking her hand and placing a kiss upon it "My ice Princess, how enchanting you are

tonight, you have taken my very breath away. I more than have my work cut out for me tonight."

"Thank you Nicki, you look very dapper and handsome, you clean up rather well."

Scrunching his face he looks her over. "What is it?" Nina inquires.

"Something is missing."

"Whatever are you referring to?"

"Ah I know you are missing… these." He pulls a box out of his pocket and opens it, inland within the velvet folds is the most stunning pair of sapphire and diamond teardrop earrings.

"Nicki NO!" she argues "You did not, those are not, no I cannot accept them that is just too much."

"You do not like them?" he inquires faking shock and insult.

"Oh no they are gorgeous I have never seen such beauty" she whispers as she caresses them.

“Well I have and they pale in comparison, you must wear them they are a gift and I will not take no for an answer. Please indulge me chere.”

“You must wear them Nicolette they compliment your gown perfectly” says Vanessa as she admires them.

“Very well” she surrenders looking at the pleading face of Nicki and giddy smile from Vanessa. Going back inside to put them on she is in awe of their beauty as she admires their sparkle in the candlelight.

With one last glance at herself she turns to rejoin the others when she sees Steven leaning against the pillar watching her.

Jumping back clutching her chest she whispers “You frightened me.”

“My apologies I wished not to disturb you, I enjoy watching you when you think no one is” pushing himself off he is before her side within two strides. He takes one earring into his hand admiring it, releasing it he allows his hand to graze down her neck continuing down her arm until he has finally come to her hand, which he pulls up to his lips. His eyes boring

into hers cause a heat to erupt through her as the memory of her dream slams to the forefront of her mind.

“Did your mother not teach you it isn’t polite to gawk?”

“I do not believe I was gawking merely admiring a beauty that takes my very breath away. You know not how it pains me knowing that I shall not be the one at your side tonight.”

“Steven please, of such flattery I am undeserving.”

“You deserve much more than mere words my dear, so much more” he whispers as he pulls in closer, towering above her he looks down at her and with the crook of his curled index finger pulls her chin up to look him in the eye. Nina looks at him through her lashes and he whispers “You know not what you do to me...” his voice trails off and all Nina can do is breathlessly whisper “Steven”.

“There the two of you are!” exclaims Vanessa. Steven drops his hold on her and takes a step back as Vanessa appears at her friends side looping her arm through

Nina's escorting or rather pulling her out, as Nina has completely lost the ability to walk. Stevens's words have rendered her mute and turned her legs into boneless mush. Walking on to the balcony the fresh summer air hits Nina like a slap in the face, she is crimson with embarrassment that Vanessa caught them in such an intimate moment.

'Did she hear what he said, oh the embarrassment! I cannot believe he said that to me. What is he thinking, NO NINA what were you thinking' she chastises herself. 'You need to say away from him, he is soooo much worse for you than Nicki. Nicki you could resist but this one you obviously can't, you need to put a stop to this at once before you are in too deep and you hurt yourself and him for just a few selfish stolen moments. Ok, Ok' Nina takes a deep breath and sees Vanessa looking worriedly at her, brows closely knit together.

"Are you alright?" asks Vanessa.

"Yes I am, other than my mortification that you witnessed that".

Taking her by the elbow Vanessa guides Nina away from the crowd "My dear there is nothing for you to be

ashamed of, you are not the first of my friends that Steven has tried to seduce. I wish for you to know what you are entering into if that is the course you wish to take. He isn't like Nicki; Steven is a different creature all together. With Nicki a romance it can be gay, playful and romantic but with Steven it is a whirlwind of emotion and unbridled passion. I know it may seem enticing but he is intense and very proud, extremely guarded and rarely shows his true self. If he does he loses himself so quickly, he is incapable of holding back and when he gets hurt, which he does easily because of his foolish pride, he retreats and cuts himself off completely. That is when we lose him all over again, eventually when he returns he is less and less the Steven we knew. It really is quite a sad tale one I wish for you not to have to live, but I cannot stop it or you or him for that matter. Just be careful and be certain before you proceed."

"Is that why Nicki has been the way he ..."

Vanessa smiles "Yes. He knows Steven well and he does not wish for you to fall into the same snare. Moreover, I think that his pride also plays a part in his

dislike of Steven. He does not wish for you to choose Steven when you did not choose him.

"Yes, well that I have gathered, there is a bit of rivalry there."

"When it comes to you yes, but usually no, they have very different tastes. Now let us return my love they shall wonder where we disappeared to."

As they rejoin their party Nina takes her place at Nicki's side "They are beautiful, thank you again."

"No mon cour thank you for bestowing upon me the honor of being the man by your side tonight" he says looking at her tenderly.

She looks up at him as he takes her hands in his, Nina smiles up at him as tears threaten to overflow. The family is making their way out and when they are the only ones left Nina hugs Nicki tightly whispering "your friendship means more to me than all the jewels in all the world, promise me you will never leave me."

He smiles down at her and kisses the top of her head "I could not even if I wanted to mon chere, not even if I wanted to."

“Good” she says with a laugh as she wipes away the tears that have escaped. “I am such a foolish chit.”

“No mon ami you are strong and beautiful and as hopeless as I am, come” he grabs her hand “this night will be something to remember, but not without us” he bellows as they race through the house and into the carriage in order to catch up to the rest of the family.

To Be Continued.....

Chapter 13

At Water's Edge - Chapter 14.2

Hi Guys!!! Ok so i have been very lazy as of late with writing and the uploads, but feel horrible for it so here is a snippet of 14.2 there will be one more part of the Ball Chapter 14.3 i hope to get it to you soon. Hope you like it.

Kisses love always JoJo!!

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“Promise” she looks at him with such innocence and fear Nicki’s heart melts for her.

“Not even if you banish me, I shall always be lurking in the shadows” he jests.

“You are a beast!” she swats at him.

“And yet you love me regardless” he laughs at her as he escapes her wrath.

Their coach lurches forward and comes to a stop before the stairs. A royal footman opens the carriage door; Nicki exits first and waits by the door hand extended to assist Nina out.

Her hand reaches out for his desperately and holds on tight as she makes it down the steps, looking past Nicki’s smiling face the grandeur finally hits her.

The castle is ablaze with light, fire casting ominous yet romantic light across the grounds, the stairs are covered with garlands of flowers, the scent of which is intermingling with the burning wax making for a strangely intoxicating aroma.

Nina tries to take it all in wanting to remember everything not allowing a single detail to escape her. As more and more guests begin to arrive Nina is in awe of all the colors and gowns, seeing her face Nicki whispers “You are more beautiful than all of them combined, never forget that.”

Nina smiles “Stop, if you persist I shall have a head as big as yours, however will we get home, our heads will never fit into the coach.”

Nicki laughs wholeheartedly drawing attention to them seeing who he is with sends the tongues a wagging. Realizing this Nicki ushers them inside without any further a due. Making their way up they wait for their names to be announced Nina holds tight on to her escort, he looks down at her and whispers “If you hold on any tighter I fear I will not have a hand by time we reach our party below.”

“Very funny” she retorts as she looks down below to her new family anxiously awaiting their descent.

She sees the Duke and Duchess as well as the Dowager on the arm of The Doctor and Fiona with Steven. Fiona is glowing and Steven is dashing as

ever, a flush begins to creep up to her cheeks as she recalls their exchange from earlier tonight. Just as the memory begins to play out in her mind he looks up at her, they make eye contact and Nina's heart skips a beat.

But there isn't time to think they are next, the couple before them begins to make their descent and Nina and Nicki take their place at the top of the stairs.

"The Count Nicholas William Deveroux escorting Miss Nicolette Martin" the herald bellows catching the attention of all those below.

Nina looks to Nicki excitedly, together they make their way down the stairs smiling at those below, once they reach the landing they join the family.

"Well done my dear" congratulates the Dowager "I know all too well how nerve-wracking it is to be presented, you did it beautifully."

"Thank you, it is because of all of your support that made it a pleasant and exhilarating experience. I am just sorry I wasn't here to see you all do the same."

Looking at Fiona she exclaims “You look ravishing my dear, do you like it?”

“Of course I do, I am the envy of the ton and not just for my charming escort” she blushes as she looks to Steven.

“Yes it thus appears we have attracted quite an audience” Nina notes as she looks about them, just then the trumpets sound and the herald announces “His Royal Highness King *George the Third and Her Royal Highness Queen Charlotte” everyone turns and bows as the royal couple descend the stairs. They stop at the landing and turn themselves as the last guest is announced “His Royal Highness King Fernando the VIIof Spain” everyone bows once more except for the King and Queen who receive their guest warmly. The crowd parts and the royal family with their guest lead the procession to the great hall.*

The guests enter according to their station except for Nicholas and Nina, they are fortunate enough to join the rest of the family. Once all the guests have taken their place the King makes a formal speech welcoming all especially King Fernando, as the speech ends the

dancing begins. The dance is opened by the King and Queen, shortly thereafter they are joined by the King of Spain and his companion, slowly the rest of the attendants begin their dance. Nicki guides Nina out to the dance floor and bows ever so extravagantly over her extended arm as she curtsies and attempts to suppress a giggle.

"Well aren't you being facetious tonight, whatever has gotten into you Count? Should you not be taking your escorting duties more seriously?" Nina inquires as a smile plays upon her lips. With nothing but an exuberant smile upon his lips Nicki sweeps her into his embrace and they are off, gliding on the floor in an expertly choreographed dance. The dresses swishing against one another as the couples spin, Nina is smiling giddily unable to contain her joy.

After the first dance Nina continues dancing with Nicki who has apparently taken over her dance card.

"Do you really think it fair Nicholas?" Nina chastises him.

"Is it so horrible to be in my arms all night?"

“No but there are so many beautiful women here, one must have caught your eye, I wish not to monopolize your time. Moreover, I rather your mother not question me about grandchildren again.”

“Is the idea of having her as a mother in law that horrid? Or is the thought if barring my children so disconcerting? He smiles.

“Have you seen your shoulders, I dare not think of the pain; thought dealing with your mother on a daily basis may be just as taxing.” Nina barely gets the words out through her laughter.

Their laughter causes a multitude of eyebrows to raise in question, as the crowd is a sea of whispers.

Out of the corner of her eye Nina spies Steven dancing with a completely smitten Fiona. He whispers to her and she flushes even brighter if possible. T he two are such a stark contrast from one another that it sends the tongues a wagging.

Fiona can hardly keep up with the attentions the young men are paying after every dance she has with

Steven who still refuses to allow any of the young men near her.

Nina giggles which attracts Nicki's attention "And what pray tell is so entertaining?"

"Fiona, I do believe she is completely taken with Steven and he is taking his duties quite seriously."

"Yes well she is young and inexperienced; she would be one to fall for his trickery."

"Oh come now, she deserves to enjoy herself and he is giving her just that. She is unaccustomed to such attention, and yes she is young so there is no one better to watch over her tonight to make sure none of the young men over step their bounds. Just look at the joy on her face, I am so happy for her."

The song ends and the family regroups on the edge of the dance floor. As the champagne begins to flow freely it creates a warm and increasingly boisterous gathering.

A royal servant comes by and announces to the small party "Their Highnesses have requested your presence."

“Come everyone” The Dowager herds everyone one over to the dais where the King and Queen are seated.

Decklyn and Vanessa bow and curtsy simultaneously right before the Queen takes each into her embrace. Next are the Dowager and the Doctor who are welcomed warmly and then its Nicolette’s turn with Nicki.

Nicki lets Nina ahead of him, she curtsies deeply nervously she looks up at the kind face of the Queen.

“You must be the lovely girl the ton is enamored with.”

“Oh no your majesty you must be refereeing to someone else.”

“I think not” chimes in the King.

Nicki steps forth taking his place beside Nina “Your majesties” bows Nicki.

“Count what a pleasure it is to see you again” smiles the Queen.

“Are you not the most fortunate man at the ball tonight?” asks the King.

“No your Highness I do believe that honor goes to the Earl tonight” quips Nicki smiling.

“Yes come my dear” the Queen motions to Fiona.

Fiona nervously makes her way to the royal couple and is introduced by Steven.

The clock chimes and the Queen and King excuse themselves “We shall speak again, now off you go and enjoy yourselves.”

The orchestra starts up a new song and Steven materializes at Nina’s side “I do believe this dance belongs to me” Nicki begrudgingly concedes Nina’s hand to him.

“I entrust my dear Fiona to you Count, take good care of her for me” he quips as he leads Nina away.

Steven escorts Nina out to the middle of the dance floor, standing before her he bows over his extended hand his eyes never leaving hers, hypnotized she returns his gaze as she curtsies in return. As she rises he takes a step towards her closing the gap between them. The closeness of him causes her to lose composure if but only for a moment, her breathing

accelerates with anticipation, her breath hitching in her throat as he takes her in his arms.

The song that begins to play is a slow waltz one that has fast become Nina's favorite. As the Dowager boasted Steven is an amazing dancer, they glide across the floor effortlessly setting the floor a whisper but neither is aware. Steven holds Nina firmly to him, everywhere their bodies touch sets her a tingle; looking in his eyes she is lost; it is as if it is only the two of them; floating along in a world of their own. The sight is bewildering and the guests have cleared the floor; now only spectators to the beauty of this singular couple.

With the champagne flowing through her and the joy or rather the confusion of being in his arms Nina is all sensation. The feel of his hand surrounding hers, cradling it gently yet firmly, his other hand splayed on the small of her back holding her firmly in place. She yearns to pull him in closer, to move her hand from his shoulder to his neck so that she could run her hand through his hair, to lay her head on his shoulder and breath in the scent of him, which even from this

distance is intoxicating her even more than the champagne, making her head swirl with these silly school girl thoughts.

As if reading her mind Steven looks down at her, his eyes drenched with the same intensity and passion as her own, he takes her hand and places it over his heart and holds it there covering it with his own. Playfully he intertwines their fingers, his thumb rubbing the inside of her palm, the sensation sending shivers down her spine. Only when the song ends and Steven breaks his hold on her does she realize they are in the middle of the dance floor all by themselves. When the guests break into polite applause does Steven even realize what has happened.

To their relief once the applause has died down the Queen smiling approaches the two and ask them to join her on the terrace.

"Yes your Highness" whispers a bewildered Nina, thoroughly embarrassed by the spectacle they created.

The Queen stands between the two and looping her arm through each of theirs takes them out into the fresh air.

“What a wonderful dancer you are Miss Nicolette” smiles the Queen.

“Thank you, it is all Stevens doing, he made it look so effortless” she responds stealing a glance at Steven, who is all smiles.

Nina smiles back relieved that he isn’t vexed with what just happened.

Queen Charlotte smiles looking between the two “I am told you have been friends with the Vanessa for some years now, how is it that we have never had the pleasure of meeting you sooner?”

“My family travels quite a bit and I have not been afforded the opportunity to visit until now.” She answers nervously.

The Queen stops and releases Nina’s hand to Steven.

Shocked Nina looks to the Queen who smiles at her ever so discretely, her eyes twinkling.

Not sure how to react to this Nina looks up at Steven who has not taken his eyes off of her since they walked off the dance floor.

“Are you planning for an extended stay Miss Martin?”

“Nicolette please your Highness” she smiles “Just until the end of the season, perhaps less.”

“So you have not exactly decided then. Splendid!” she exclaims clapping her hands together.

“No your grce you misunderstood, I will not be here past the season” Nina interjects but the Queen is deaf to her response.

“That gives us ample time to change her mind, isn’t that right Steven.” She looks to him mischievously.

“Umm… yes, yes plenty of time to convince you to extend your stay.” Steven blushes under her gaze.

‘He is so cute when uncomfortably put on the spot, I never imagined he would be so easy to frazzle’ she thinks to herself.

“What a beautiful dress Nicolette, is it one of your own creations?”

“Yes it is, of your praise I am most undeserving.”

“Oh we will have none of that my dear, you are more than deserving of praise, why just look what you have

accomplished in such a short period of time. Do you not agree Steven?"

Just as Steven is about to respond they are interrupted.

"Your highness you have done me a great disservice by keeping this ravishing creature from me" the crowned King of Spain whines playfully as he interjects into their conversation.

"Your Grace I would never deny you the pleasure, may I introduce you to Miss Nicolette Martin and my nephew Steven Wakefield the Earl of Glenmore."

He acknowledges Steven with a nod of the head and turns to Nina as she curtsies deeply, when she straightens he bends over her hand a presses his wet lips against her knuckles, holding on just a bit too long. While he leers at her he whispers "The pleasure is all mine, mi querido."

Nina smiles uncomfortably as she tries to extract her hand from his unsuccessfully. "Muchas gracias your Highness, you are most liberal with your compliments."

“Usted es bienvenido! Usted habla español!” he exclaims in surprise. “¡Qué tesoro de sorpresas que es la señorita Martin "

Cursing herself for the slip of the tongue “That is the extent of my knowledge, my apologies your Highness.” She responds as she tries to extract her hand out of his once more.

Seeing her try to pull out of his grasp her loops her arm over his “You are a beautiful dancer señorita, you hypnotized me with your grace and elegance. I simply had to meet you and have a chance to dance with you myself.”

“You are most kind your Grace but I am afraid that Miss Nicolette’s dance card if full” interjects Steven.

" I am certain arrangements can be made to procure me a dance with his lovely creature, isn’t that correct your Majesty.” He turns to the Queen.

" Rules are rules even for Kings, I am afraid there is not much that I can do, the young lady gave her word Fernando.”

His disposition changes as he angrily looks at the Queen, resentment flashes before his eyes like that of a petulant child denied his newest toy. He sneers "Promises are meant to be broken, this dance is mine" he stresses.

" *I take it you shall deliver the disappointing message to the young man next on the list." Turning he takes Nina firmly by the hand and leads her back into the ball room. Steven takes a step after them livid with the audacity of the king.*

The Queen holds him back whispering "No Steven it will only make matters worse, let him have his dance, no harm will come to her. Come with me."

Nina is horrified that the beast of a king forces her to dance with him. This is definitely not her favorite part about this century; if this was back home she would have cursed him out for even trying to touch her without her consent. Turning back she sees the Queen hold Steven back from following after them, she smiles at him apologetically and he manages a weak smile.

' Might as well get this over with ' she thinks to herself begrudgingly.

About the Author

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